

SAFE FOOD COALITION

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Consumer Groups Urge USDA to Finalize Labeling of Mechanically Tenderized Meat

Members of the Safe Food Coalition wrote today to U.S. Department of Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack urging him to finalize a rule to label mechanically tenderized beef products by the end of the year. The Secretary must then send the rule to the Office of Management and Budget for final approval. The letter is available [here](#).

If the rule is not finalized before December 31, 2014, then consumers will not see these labels until 2018. FSIS' new rule about uniform compliance dates for meat and poultry labeling require all new labels to be implemented concurrently every two years. In the current timeframe for implementation, labels finalized by December 31, 2014 will go into effect on January 1, 2016. Any labeling changes after December 31 will be implemented in the next cycle. Delays by USDA and OMB in finalizing the current proposed rule could mean that a proactive and preventive label, designed to protect public health, would not be implemented until 2018, leaving consumers vulnerable and in the dark for far too long.

Often used on less expensive cuts of meat to increase tenderness, mechanically tenderized products (such as steaks and roasts) are repeatedly pierced by small needles or blades, thereby increasing the risk that pathogens located on the surface of the product will be transferred to the interior. After treatment, these non-intact steaks and roasts have a greater risk of being internally contaminated, yet they look no different than non-treated product. Therefore, without a label, consumers have no indication that they are purchasing a high-risk product that needs to be cooked to a higher internal temperature to ensure safety. Labeling of mechanically tenderized products would provide institutional cooks and consumers with important product information aimed at preventing illness.

The consumer groups noted that Canada recently mandated a label for mechanically tenderized beef products, following a massive 2012 recall involving mechanically tenderized beef. In a follow-up report, Canada found a five-fold increase in risk from *E. coli* O157:H7 in mechanically tenderized products when compared to intact cuts of beef.

According to USDA, 88% of the beef establishments that performed mechanical tenderization did not use any pathogen-reduction intervention prior to treatment, and 82% of those facilities did not test the finished product. In addition, most of the beef establishments with mechanically tenderized beef operations listed 3-6 sources for their products, yet only 3% of the facilities cleaned and sanitized their equipment between batches of beef from different sources. Instead, 94% of the facilities that used mechanical tenderization cleaned/sanitized daily at the end of

production.¹ Following a once-a-day cleaning/sanitizing schedule greatly increases the likelihood of cross contamination when multiple sources are being treated at the same facility.

The groups – Center for Foodborne Illness Research & Prevention, Center for Science in the Public Interest, Consumer Federation of America, Consumers Union, Food and Water Watch, Government Accountability Project, National Consumers League – are asking Secretary Vilsack, Department of Agriculture, to immediately approve the labeling of mechanically tenderized beef products and send the proposal to OMB so it can be finalized.

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The Safe Food Coalition is made up of consumer groups, public health groups, groups representing victims of foodborne illness, and labor organizations dedicated to reducing the burden of foodborne illness in the United States by improving government food inspection programs.

The Safe Food Coalition letter to Secretary Vilsack is available [here](#).

¹ USDA/FSIS. (2008) Checklist and Reassessment of Control for E. coli O157:H7 in Beef Operations. Available at: http://www.fsis.usda.gov/wps/wcm/connect/9ce5ce22-f609-4990-bd9a-ce2c323d229b/Ecoli_Reasement___Checklist.pdf?MOD=AJPERES. Accessed 11/08/14.