policy pennings

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USDA Proposed Rule For Mechanically Tenderized Meat

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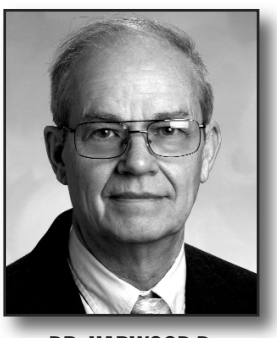

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Back "in 2009, the Safe Food Coalition sent a petition to the Secretary of Agriculture to request, among other issues, regulatory action to require that the labels of mechanically tenderized beef products disclose the fact that the products have been mechanically tenderized. The petition stated that, (1) consumers and restaurants do not have sufficient information to ensure that these products are cooked safely because FSIS [the United States Department of Agriculture, Food Safety and Inspection Service] does not provide recommended cooking temperatures for mechanically tenderized products, (2) the recommended cooking temperatures for intact products are not appropriate for non-intact, mechanically tenderized products, and (3) a labeling requirement for mechanically tenderized products is critical for consumers and retail outlets, so that they have the information necessary to safely prepare these products."

In response to this and other petitions, the FSIS issued a proposed rule, "Descriptive Designation for Needle- or Blade-Tenderized (Mechanically-Tenderized) Beef Products" on June 10, 2013 (http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2013-06-10/pdf/2013-13669.pdf), FSIS will receive comments from the public until August 9, 2013. Part of the rationale for issuing this proposed rule – read "proposed regulation" – is that "the act of mechanically tenderizing a beef product potentially pushes pathogens from the exterior of the product to the interior." With pathogens in the interior of the cut as opposed to the exterior, higher interior meat temperatures and longer rest times after cooking are needed to destroy specific illness-causing pathogens.

In contrast to pounded or cubed beef where consumer can see that the cut they are purchasing is not intact "without specific labeling, raw or partially cooked mechanically tenderized [needle- or blade-tenderized] beef products could be mistakenly perceived by consumers to be whole, intact muscle cuts." Thus, the FSIS reasons that knowing that a beef cut has been mechanically tenderized might influence affect the customer's purchase decision as well as the way they cooked it, given that "the literature suggests that many consumers are aware of and a portion of these read the safe handling instructions labels, and reported changing their meat preparation methods because of the labels."

The proposed rule calls for the labeling of mechanically tenderized beef with the labeling containing cooking instructions – the USDA recommends an internal temperature of 145°F followed by a hold time of 3 minutes, producing a medium rare piece of beef.

In his Safety Zone blog on www.meatingplace.com (registration required for 5 free articles per month), James Marsden, Kansas State University Regent's Distinguished Professor of Food Safety, asserts that labeling does not get to the root of the problem which is that consumers have no control over the preparation of their piece of beef in a restaurant and may not read or follow the instructions when they are at home.

Instead of labeling, he argues for a scientifically validated kill step that would remove pathogens from the surface of intact cuts of beef prior to the mechanical tenderization process. He believes that this can be accomplished under current meat inspection (HACCP) regulations.

His blogging colleague at www.meatingplace.com, Richard Raymond, former Under Secretary of Agriculture for Food Safety writes, "To the best of my memory, every recall due to illnesses caused by non-intact steaks was linked back to inadequate [processing] plant procedures to reduce the risk of cross-contamination by the needles or blades used in the process."

In response to Raymond's blog, Randall Phebus, Professor of Animal Sciences and Industry at Kansas State University, writes, "I see no downside to the new label recommendations on cooking temperature, and I also feel consumers deserve to know that a beef cut is or isn't mechanically tenderized." Δ

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