Notices

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This section of the FEDERAL REGISTER contains documents other than rules or proposed rules that are applicable to the public. Notices of hearings and investigations, committee meetings, agency decisions and rulings, delegations of authority, filing of petitions and applications and agency statements of organization and functions are examples of documents appearing in this section.

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Food Safety and Inspection Service

[Docket No. 97–057N]

Notice of Change of Inspection Procedures; Adoption of Selective Carcass Palpation Procedure for Lambs

AGENCY: Food Safety and Inspection Service, USDA.

ACTION: Notice.

SUMMARY: The Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) of the Department of Agriculture (USDA) is clarifying the changes that it intends to make in its inspection procedures for lambs. Currently, inspectors extensively palpate the carcasses of lambs for the purpose of detecting and removing carcasses with caseous lymphadenitis. The Agency announced in a October 27, 1997, **Federal Register** notice that it would be changing its inspection procedure for lambs in response to a petition from the American Sheep Association. In this notice, the Agency is clarifying the changes that it intends to make and the basis for those changes.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Dr. Alice Thaler, Chief, Concepts and Design Branch, Inspection Systems Development Division, Office of Policy, Program Development, and Evaluation, FSIS; telephone (202) 205–0005 or FAX (202) 690–0824.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: FSIS is issuing this notice to clarify, and to provide additional information about the basis for, certain planned changes in how it inspects lamb carcasses that it announced in the **Federal Register** of October 27, 1997 (62 FR 55569). The National Advisory Committee on Meat and Poultry Inspection recommended that FSIS clarify the terminology that it used in the October 27 notice, and that the Agency more fully explain the basis for its planned action. In the October 27 notice, FSIS used the term ''hands-on'' to describe its current inspection procedures and the term ''hands-off'' to describe the new inspection procedures that it planned to implement. FSIS believes that the terms ''extensive carcass palpation'' and ''selective carcass palpation'' more accurately describe its current and its planned new inspection procedures for lambs. Thus, it is replacing the terms used in the October 27 notice to describe its inspection procedures with these terms and will use these terms.

Traditionally, USDA meat inspectors have extensively palpated the carcasses of lambs as part of their post-mortem evaluation of these animals. The American Sheep Industry Association petitioned the Agency to end this practice for food safety reasons. The primary justification for this long-standing extensive carcass palpation practice was to detect carcasses with caseous lymphadenitis.

In determining the desirability of such a procedure for lambs, FSIS considered two questions: (1) Will diseased carcasses or parts be more likely to reach consumers using a selective carcass palpation inspection procedure, and (2) Are current inspection procedures which use extensive carcass palpation likely to be spreading or adding contamination to carcasses?

Description of Extensive and Selective Carcass Palpation

Extensive carcass palpation for lambs is described in the Meat and Poultry Inspection Manual's inspection procedures for sheep (which includes lambs) and goats (MPI Manual 11.1(j)(2)) as follows:

- Palpate prefemoral, superficial inguinal, or supramammary, and popliteal lymph nodes.
- Palpate back and sides of carcass.
- Palpate prescapular lymph nodes and shoulders, and lift forelegs.

These procedures are considered extensive carcass palpation because no other livestock species receives palpation of this magnitude.

In contrast, selective carcass palpation will mean that inspectors palpate lamb carcasses only when they have reason to believe that disease conditions or pathology may be present. Selective carcass palpation will apply only to carcasses and not to viscera. Selective carcass palpation will not change other inspection procedures for lambs such as turning the carcass, which is necessary to perform inspection procedures.

Comparing Extensive Carcass Palpation to Selective Carcass Palpation Procedures

In determining whether to change inspection procedures for lamb carcasses, FSIS first considered the benefits derived from extensive carcass palpation and determined what food safety or other consumer protection benefits, if any, are attributable to the current inspection procedure. Caseous lymphadenitis is the primary disease of lambs detected by extensive carcass palpation. In the United States, six federally inspected plants slaughter 80 percent of the lambs. From Fiscal Years 1987 to 1996, these six plants slaughtered 26,347,480 lambs and yearlings (present data do not distinguish between lambs and yearlings), and FSIS inspectors condemned only 1,203 animals for caseous lymphadenitis, a 0.0046 percent condemnation rate.

Caseous lymphadenitis is rare in lambs, and it does not cause foodborne illness in people who eat lamb, regardless of how thoroughly or not it is cooked, or in people who handle lamb. Of the diseases routinely present in lambs, seven are of public health concern: actinobacillosis, campylobacteriosis, contagious ecthyma, echinococcosis, leptospirosis, Salmonella dysentery, and toxoplasmosis. None of these seven, however, requires carcass palpation for diagnosis.

FSIS then considered whether the current inspection techniques used on lambs that employ extensive carcass palpation cause inspectors to spread or add contamination to lamb carcasses. Although there is no published data on this question, the unpublished data provided to FSIS by the American Sheep Industry Association (LeValley 1997) [1] and data from other food handling and health care industries (Gould and Ream 1996; Wenzel and Pulverer 1995), support the concern that extensive carcass palpation can contaminate lamb carcasses or spread contamination.

[1] This information is on display in the FSIS Docket Room, 300 12th St., SW., Washington, DC.

Conclusion

The primary reason for extensive carcass palpation in lambs is to detect lesions of caseous lymphadenitis. This disease does not cause foodborne illness and has an extremely low prevalence in lambs. Other diseases routinely present in lamb carcasses that are of public health concern are not detected by carcass palpation. Therefore, there is little basis to find that selective carcass palpation will cause foodborne illness or cause diseased carcasses or parts to reach consumers.

On the other hand, the cited literature attests to the fact that hands are capable of spreading or adding microorganisms. Although it has not been proven directly that extensive carcass palpation by lamb inspectors causes microbial contamination or actually spreads such contamination, the evidence from the sheep industry and allied industries strongly suggests that this can occur. Thus, current inspection procedures using extensive carcass palpation can spread or add contamination to carcasses.

FSIS, therefore, announced in the October 27, 1997, **Federal Register** notice that it was taking a hands-off inspection approach to lambs. As stated previously, this approach is more accurately described as selective carcass palpation. Adopting this approach entails a number of steps, including consultation with employee organizations. Additional information may be found in a new FSIS directive on the Agency's planned inspection procedures for lambs, which will be effective upon publication and after consultations have been completed.

FSIS will continue to monitor condemnation rates in plants that slaughter lambs to identify the impact, if any, of the change. Further, the Agency intends to look at the implications of handling product during inspection procedures with regard to the production of all meat and poultry products.

Done at Washington, DC, on: November 4, 1998.

Thomas J. Billy,

Administrator.

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DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Sunshine Act Meeting

AGENCY: Rural Telephone Bank, USDA.

ACTION: Staff Briefing for the Board of Directors.

TIME AND DATE: 2:00 p.m., Wednesday, November 18, 1998.

PLACE: Room 5030, South Building, Department of Agriculture, 1400 Independence Avenue, SW., Washington, DC.

STATUS: Open.

MATTERS TO BE DISCUSSED: Introduction of board directors and staff and general discussion involving:

1. 1999 agency budget.
2. Current telecommunications industry issues.
3. Liquidating account and Federal Credit Reform.
4. Status of PBO planning.
5. Legal advisor to privatization committee.
6. Administrative issues.

ACTION: Board of Directors Meeting.