

Checking all food impossible, experts say

WASHINGTON, D.C. (AP) - No matter how sophisticated government testing of meat and poultry becomes, the sheer volume produced in America may make it impossible to detect all dangerous bacteria in food, inspectors say.

"There is probably no way to absolutely foolproof this process," Agriculture Secretary Dan Glickman said.

For example, the Hudson Foods Co. ground beef plant in Nebraska, shut down last week during a federal probe into E. coli contamination, had been producing up to three million pounds of frozen hamburger every week. That's 12 million quarter-pound patties.

Agriculture Department inspectors go to slaughterhouses that supply Hudson. But it is not practical to test all that meat for E. coli, salmonella or other bacteria that can make people sick, officials say.

And health risks in the meat industry can start well before the cattle reach slaughterhouses.

Agriculture experts told U.S. News & World Report that farmers often add waste substances to livestock and poultry feed. Chicken manure, which is cheaper than alfalfa, is increasingly used as feed by cattle farmers despite possible health risks to consumers, says the magazine reaching newsstands today.

"Feeding manure that has not been properly processed is supercharging the cattle feces with pathogens likely to cause disease in consumers," Dr. Neal Barnard, head of the Washington-based health lobby, Physicians for Responsible Medicine, told the magazine.

This can make the Agriculture Department meat inspectors' job even harder.

Tight budgets at the agency just exacerbate the problem. The number of inspectors at the agency's Food

Safety and Inspection Service has fallen from about 12,000 in 1978 to 7,500 today - to cover the 6,500 private meat and poultry plants around the country.

The Hudson situation has shaken some Americans' confidence, a new Newsweek poll found; 54 percent of respondents said they are less likely to buy burgers at fast-food restaurants, and 41 percent said they are less likely to buy hamburger meat at grocery stores.

Burger King announced Saturday that it no longer would buy ground beef from Hudson's Columbus, Neb., plant. A statement by Hudson called it "a serious disappointment" because Burger King had been a major purchaser.

According to the Newsweek poll, 62 percent of respondents said the government should spend more money on food inspection to ensure that U.S.-produced food is safe, with an even division over whether the government is already doing a good job. The Aug. 22 survey of 501 adults, appearing in the magazine today, has a five percentage point margin of error.

Pathogens such as E. coli remain a health problem in America. The federal Centers for Disease Control estimates that up to 9,800 E. coli cases and 120,000 salmonella cases per year occur when people don't sufficiently cook ground beef containing the bacteria. Cooking at high-enough temperatures will kill the germs.

Together, the microbes cost upwards of \$500 million a year in medical bills and lost productivity, according to a USDA estimate.

The first meat inspection laws date back to 1906, in the wake of books such as Upton Sinclair's "The Jungle" that exposed the once-filthy conditions in the packing industry.

Under those laws, which have remained essentially unchanged for

90 years, USDA inspectors worked inside private meat and poultry plants nationwide. They examined sample carcasses and products by sight, smell and touch, trying to determine if the product was safe and wholesome.

But the federal rules never required scientific tests for bacteria like E. coli. Some larger companies did it anyway, while smaller ones tested only if customers had specific requirements.

Now, new inspection rules are being phased in by the year 2000 that for the first time require some scientific testing for bacteria at all meat and poultry processing plants. In the case of E. coli, all plants regardless of size had to begin their own testing last Jan. 27.

Even that will involve only samples taken once or twice a day from plants that can move tens of thousands of pounds of meat a day.

Still, Glickman said the focus will be on critical points in plants where contamination is likely. In the case of E. coli, animal fecal matter is the most frequent source, so tests will be done at points along the chain where its presence is prevalent, such as after cattle are slaughtered, when the meat is cut into large pieces for various uses.

"Hopefully you'll be able to discover problems much earlier in the process," Glickman said.

Such scientific testing generally involves taking a sample from meat, putting it in a lab dish and testing it chemically to see if harmful bacteria are present.

At Hudson, company officials agreed to recall all the beef processed at the plant since the date of contamination - up to 25 million pounds - and to shut down the plant until stronger safety recommendations were met. There was no indication when the plant might reopen.

Company founder James T. Hudson said the Nebraska plant had done 57 E. coli tests of its own since the beginning of 1997. All were negative.

The source of contamination for Hudson beef patties processed during three days in early June has not been found. But government and company officials say it likely came from a slaughterhouse supplier outside the plant.

Thus, Hudson said the company will now do E. coli testing on the meat arriving from slaughterhouses.

"We're going to start inspecting every lot that comes in, rather than

just depending on the supplier," he said. "We're going to visit with some of our suppliers and make sure we're comfortable with their testing."

The new federal rules also require companies to keep much better records of their testing and monitoring to enable officials to trace the source of any contamination that does occur.

But in Hudson's case, the medium-sized Nebraska plant won't have to comply fully with the rules until January 1999. Federal inspectors said this week they were investigating whether Hudson's record-keeping had been lacking.

CORRECTION

The university collected about \$1 million in revenue from vending machines on campus last year. The *Daily Nebraskan* previously reported the university collected about \$1.26 million.

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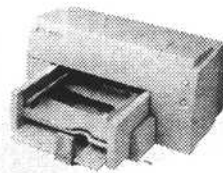
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