Largest beef recall in US history reveals compromised food supply

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Nearly three weeks after the release of an undercover video documenting sick cows being sent to slaughter, a major US beef producer has requested the recall of more than 143 million pounds of beef—much of it supplying public schools nationwide over the past two years.

The recall, many times larger than any other beef recall in US history, yet again exposes the dangers posed by the weakening of government regulations on corporate operations in general and food production in particular. At every step, from production through to marketing, public health is dependent on voluntary safety measures of big business.

The video, released January 30 by the Humane Society, shows cows that are too sick or crippled to stand up being shoved, dragged and rolled across cement-floored pens at the Hallmark Meat Packing slaughterhouse in Chino, California. Immobile cows whose hides are caked with manure can be seen being rammed with forklifts, jabbed in the eyes, dragged along by chains, shocked and subjected to simulated drowning with high-pressure hoses to get them on their feet in the so-called "kill box" of the facility.

The Hallmark plant is a subsidiary of Westland Meat Company, which has sold about 100 million pounds of beef, worth $146 million, to the federal Department of Agriculture over the past five years for its school lunch and needy families programs. Westland received the department's "Supplier of the Year" award for the National School Lunch Program in 2004-05.

Cows too sick to stand, or "downers," are officially banned from use as human or animal food because of the risk of mad cow disease, or bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE). The disease, which eats away at the brains and nervous system of cattle, can be spread among livestock and contracted by humans in a variant form that is untreatable, irreversible, and fatal. It cannot be cooked out of tainted meat, and its symptoms may take years to surface.

In addition, downer cattle have much more contact with feces, increasing the likelihood of contamination of entire lots of processed meat from life-threatening bacteria such as E. coli and salmonella.

Thousands upon thousands of children and poor people have been put at risk in a way that may take years to assess. The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) placed an "administrative hold" on Westland meat in its possession beginning January 30, yet it was not until February 18 that the company itself announced a recall. Beef products dating all the way back to February 1, 2006 were included in the recall.

In spite of the record-breaking scope of the recall and potential for a public health crisis, company and federal officials have sought to downplay the incident. The USDA called the risk of mad cow disease "negligible," classifying the recall as Class II, indicating a "remote probability" of adverse consequences.

Dick Raymond, the USDA's undersecretary of agriculture for food safety, told reporters, "We do not know how much of this product is out there at this time. We do not feel this product presents a health risk of any significance."

Reflecting the reluctance with which federal regulatory bodies approach their mandates, Raymond added, "But the product was produced in noncompliance with our regulations, so therefore we do have to take this action." In a separate statement widely quoted by press reports, Raymond made the absurd claim that the meat posed little health risk because "The great majority has probably been consumed."

For its part, the company said it was "shocked" by the exposure of the practices at its Chino plant. Two

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employees captured in the Humane Society video were fired from the Westland plant and face criminal charges for animal cruelty. Daniel Agarte Navarro, the pen manager, has been charged with five felony and three misdemeanor counts, and Luis Sanchez faces three misdemeanor counts in San Bernardino district court.

The company itself, however, faces no criminal charges.

In an interview with the *Washington Post* published January 30, Westland President Steve Mendell, who is also the manager of operations at the Hallmark Meat Packing plant, claimed no knowledge of the use of stun guns. “That’s impossible... electrical prods are not allowed on the property,” he said.

Asked whether workers were using forklifts to move downer cows, he told the newspaper, “I can’t imagine that.” Questioned as to whether cows were subjected to simulated drowning, Mendell said, “That’s absolutely not true. We have a massive humane treatment program here that we follow to the nth degree, so this doesn’t even sound possible... I don’t stand out there all day, but to me it would be next to impossible.”

Mendell’s statements notwithstanding, the video makes clear that the two fired workers were not acting furtively in their abuse of the downer cows. Rather, they acted in the open, in a manner that suggested their behavior was common, routine and accepted.

Obvious questions arise as to the conduct of USDA inspectors required to be on-site at slaughterhouses such as Hallmark. The USDA maintains a continuous presence at more than 6,200 slaughterhouses and meat processing facilities nationwide, with a staff of 7,800 inspectors.

Inspectors are supposed to be on-hand to conduct pre-slaughter inspections of all cows to ensure that no diseased animals pass into the food supply. They are also supposed to return unannounced to observe the handling of the animals to ensure they are managed in a way that minimizes discomfort and stress. Yet for at least two years, the USDA estimates Westland violated federal regulations under the noses of its inspectors. How was this possible?

In a February 17 press release, the USDA’s Food Safety and Inspection Service made it clear that it would not stiffen inspection procedures at slaughter facilities because of the recall. “FSIS believes this to be an isolated incident of egregious violations to humane handling requirements and the prohibition of non-ambulatory disabled cattle from entering the food supply,” the agency said.

Such “isolated incidents” are becoming more and more frequent. In 2007, the FSIS issued 66 suspensions of meat processing facilities and registered 691 “noncompliance records” for inhumane handling. Very few downer cows are checked for BSE, even when they are identified as sick or injured by USDA veterinarians. Instead, hundreds of thousands are approved for slaughter and sent into the food supply each year.

National recalls on E. coli-contaminated meat have spiked in the past year, to 21, up from eight in 2006 and five the year before. 2007 saw a string of huge recalls, including a recall of nearly 22 million pounds of tainted ground beef, at the time the second-largest beef recall in history.

Governmental oversight has been steadily dismantled and consumer protections loosened over the past decade in the name of the “free market,” even as the food system has become more international. When outbreaks occur, they are widespread, and federal agencies are able to respond only with requests to companies to voluntarily initiate a recall. As a result, the population is increasingly exposed to hazards which it has no means of detecting or preventing.

In the case of the present recall, parents have no way of knowing whether the food their children are served in public school lunch rooms is safe, or where it comes from.

The Humane Society video can be found here: http://www.hsus.org/

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