

USDA Issues Largest Meat Recall in History

Alleged animal abuse at California harvesting facility prompts recall of 143 million pounds of beef.

Story by
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The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) announced Feb. 17 a massive recall of 143 million pounds (lb.) of beef harvested during a two-year period at a

Chino, Calif., processing facility.

USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) ordered the recall — the largest of its kind in U.S. history — after

evidence emerged that Hallmark/Westland Meat Packing Co. did not consistently contact the FSIS public health veterinarian in situations involving nonambulatory cattle. Although USDA says the beef presents a negligible risk to human health, FSIS has determined the harvested downer animals were unfit for human food because the cattle did not receive complete and proper inspection.

The recall stems from allegations that first surfaced Jan. 30, after The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) released an undercover video showing Hallmark/Westland employees allegedly ramming downer animals with forklifts, shooting high-pressure water up their noses and using electrical prods to motivate the animals to stand — all actions in clear violation of government standards and the Humane Methods of Slaughter Act. According to an interview in *The Washington Post*, the unnamed undercover investigator who shot the video said the practices occurred prior to a USDA inspector visiting the facility, “with the goal of getting the animals on their feet for the short time the inspector was there.”

USDA protocol states that once an ambulatory animal has passed antemortem inspection, then becomes nonambulatory, such an animal must be re-examined by the public health veterinarian to determine whether the animal should be harvested — a step Hallmark/Westland employees ignored. According to USDA, if the veterinarian finds the animal had sustained an acute injury — such as a fracture — then it would be eligible for processing. If the downer was found to have a chronic condition, the animal would be condemned and prohibited to enter the food supply since it presents an increased risk of harboring diseases such as bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE).

Following HSUS' video release, Secretary of Agriculture Ed Schafer called on the Office of the Inspector General, FSIS and the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) Jan. 30 to conduct an investigation into the matter. The USDA placed an administrative hold on Hallmark/Westland meat products headed for federal food and nutrition programs, including the National School Lunch Program, the Emergency Food Assistance Program and the Food Distribution Program on Indian reservations. On Feb. 1, the company voluntarily stopped operations, and on Feb. 4, FSIS suspended all products from the packing company.

Two employees in the video, who were fired by Hallmark/Westland, now face felony animal cruelty charges filed by the San Bernardino District Attorney Feb. 15. According to *The Associated Press* (AP), a former pen manager faces five felony counts of animal cruelty and three misdemeanors; another employee faces three misdemeanor counts.

The products destined for the federal food assistance programs will now be removed from schools and other holding facilities and destroyed, according to USDA. All Hallmark/Westland products delivered since Feb. 1, 2006 — most of which were sent to distribution centers in bulk packages — are included in the recall.

Dick Raymond, undersecretary of agriculture for food safety, told *CNN.com* that most of the recalled meat has probably already been eaten. Any remaining meat, however, must be destroyed and cannot be used or reconditioned for human consumption, USDA stated.

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— *James Reagan*

USDA officials said the agency will pursue every avenue to reimburse states for the value of products in the federal food and nutrition programs that must be destroyed due to the recall.

AP reported that recalled meat has accumulated in several schools, including at least seven Michigan school districts; the Grand Rapids public schools must now throw out 10 tons of hamburger.

The recall has also spurred action by lawmakers. Rep. Rosa DeLauro (D-Conn.), told AP she's concerned the video and resulting recall “demonstrate just how far our food safety system has collapsed.”

FSIS currently has 7,800 inspection personnel who provide inspection to more than 6,200 federally inspected establishments, 900 of which are livestock harvesting facilities. USDA Assistant Administrator Kenneth Petersen said Feb. 19 the agency would begin implementing extra checks at those facilities, according to *USA Today*.

Meanwhile, Secretary Schafer has expressed his dismay regarding the inhumane handling of cattle. “It is extremely unlikely that these animals were at risk for BSE because of the multiple safeguards; however, this action is necessary because plant procedures violated USDA regulations,” he said.

James Reagan, National Cattlemen's Beef Association's (NCBA's) chairman of the Beef Industry Food Safety Council, said while the USDA-issued recall is out of an abundance of caution, the organization supports USDA's recall as a precautionary measure. Reagan said the ban on nonambulatory cattle is just one of many steps taken to produce safe beef.

“As an organization representing beef producers, we have two expectations when cattle leave our farms and ranches:

that our animals are treated humanely and that every step is taken to produce safe beef,” he said.

Steve Mendell, Hallmark/Westland president, released a statement Feb. 3 noting the company's disciplinary actions taken regarding the two identified employees as well as aggressive measures to ensure all employees follow the company's humane handling policies and procedures.

“We are also cooperating with the USDA investigators on the allegations of inhumane handling treatment, which is a serious breach of our company's policies and training,” Mendell said. “We are dedicating our full efforts and resources to fully cooperate with the USDA investigative team that has been assigned to our plant.”

This latest recall dwarfs more recent meat recalls by comparison. The

Hallmark/Westland recall is more than six times the amount of beef recalled by Topps Meat Co. last September (21.7 million lb.).

At press time, the Office of the Inspector General and FSIS were continuing the investigation. Further details about the recall and USDA actions are available at www.usda.gov/actions.

