

PolicyPennings by Daryll E. Ray & Harwood D. Schaffer

Pink slime: An object lesson for the meat industry?

With a long-term decline in per capita consumption—94 pound per capita in 1976 to 60 pounds per capita in 2009—the last thing that US cattle producers need is the current controversy over “pink slime.” And with the controversy in full swing, they certainly don’t need industry and political leaders fighting the wrong battles (science, safety, and attacking the critics).

Pink slime is the moniker given to “lean finely textured beef” (LFTB), not by current critics of the product, but by a USDA microbiologist in 2002 as it was being debated whether or not the USDA should require LFTB to be labeled an additive in ground beef.

In the process of breaking the beef carcass down into the various cuts, fat is trimmed away. As anyone who has trimmed a piece of meat they have brought home from the grocery store knows, some, if not most, of that trim contains strands of meat. While for the average homeowner, it is not worth it to try to recover the meat encased in the fat, for meat packers who handle hundreds of thousands of pounds of beef, those muscle strands, often up to 50 percent lean, add up to a lot of potentially wasted protein.

To recover that protein, the packers developed a process using mild heat and a centrifuge to separate the protein from the surrounding fat, resulting in a very lean and finely textured product—LFTB. Because the trimmings come from a large number of pieces of meat it is imperative that the LFTB be treated in some way to ensure that all potentially harmful bacteria are killed. With irradiation effectively off the table, packers are left with chemical treatments like ammonium hydroxide and citric acid.

Because the LFTB is very lean, it is added to ground beef to raise the protein level of the final product that otherwise would require the use of leaner more expensive cuts of meat.

We have purchased 80 percent lean ground beef in 5-pound plastic sleeves that obviously have had LFTB added. Cut the sleeve open to take the meat out and the presence of a fine textured pink product is obvious. The term pink slime is accurate. The advantage: it costs significantly less than the ribbons of 80 percent lean ground beef in the foam tray in the adjacent display case.

Once the recent controversy began, USDA and industry officials defended LFTB with arguments like “beef is beef” and thus it need not be listed on the label. They also asserted that ammonium hydroxide is a processing aid, not an additive, and does not become a “significant” part of the ground beef, thus it does not

need to be listed as an additive. In engaging in arguments like that they effectively shoot themselves (and all cattle producers) in the foot.

The concern being voiced is not primarily about these issues. It is the “ick factor” and the fact that consumers cannot determine which products contain pink slime and which do not. The result is falling demand for all hamburger as consumers switch to other meat products, at least temporarily.

Many of the consumers who have raised concern about the presence of pink slime in hamburger still purchase hot dogs and sausage, and “who wants to know how they are produced?” The difference is their labels contain a list of ingredients including things like potassium lactate, sodium diacetate, sodium erythorbate, and sodium nitrate. In addition hot dogs are produced in a dizzying number of varieties including “all beef,” “turkey and chicken,” and the traditional mixture that produces those yummy “dogs” that we ate as kids. In each case, the consumer can read the label and make a choice about the product they want to buy.

If people will buy hot dogs that contain small amounts of sodium nitrate—a component in some fertilizers as well as fireworks—what is the problem with listing centrifuge extracted finely textured beef, that has been treated with ammonium hydroxide to kill any bacteria, to the ground beef label? Will people expect the same for other products? Probably, well really, certainly. But what is the problem with that?

One of the principles of economics is symmetry of information between the buyer and the seller. In this case, it seems, the lack of symmetry and the unwillingness of the industry to provide symmetry has come back to haunt the markets that are so important to cattle producers.

The beyond-the-farm-gate portion of the meat industry, along with its organizations and advocates, has engaged in a long-standing fight against labeling meat. That stance has become counterproductive. It appears to us that by fighting labeling, symmetry of information, and defending questionable production practices, the advocates of “industrial agriculture” have accelerated consumers’ movement toward organics and vegetarianism, both of which “Big Ag” seems to loathe. With organics, consumers feel they have a better handle on what is in the food they eat.

The “take home” message for the industry is that, in an age of web crawlers, search engines, and YouTube videos that can become viral, any attempt

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to provide less than full transparency will eventually result in a full-blown media circus, to the producer's detriment. Full disclosure is the safest way to go—and it improves the level of information the consumer can use in making a choice of which products to purchase.

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