

Meat from diseased animals approved for consumers

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WASHINGTON - The federal agency overseeing food inspection is imposing new rules reclassifying as safe for human consumption animal carcasses with cancers, tumors and open sores. Federal meat inspectors and consumer groups are protesting the move to classify tumors and open sores as aesthetic problems, which permits the meat to get the government's purple seal of approval as a wholesome food product.

"I don't want to eat pus from a chicken that has pneumonia. I think it's gross," said Wenonah Hauter, director of Public Citizen's Critical Mass Energy Project. "Most Americans don't want to eat this sort of contamination in their meals." Delmer Jones, a federal food inspector for 41 years who lives in Renlap, Ala., said he's so revolted by the lowering of food wholesomeness standards that he doesn't buy meat at the supermarket anymore because he doesn't trust that it is safe to eat.

"I eat very little to no meat, but sardines and fish," said Jones, president of the National Joint Council of Meat Inspection Locals, a union of 7,000 meat inspectors nationwide affiliated with the American Federation of Government Employees. He said he's trying to get his wife to stop eating meat. "I've told her what she's eating."

The union is battling related Agriculture Department plans to rely on scientific testing of samples of butchered meats to determine the wholesomeness of meat, rather than traditional item-by-item scrutiny by federal inspectors. A 1959 federal law requires inspectors from the Agriculture Department's Food Inspection and Safety System to inspect all slaughtered animals before they can be sold for human consumption.

The Agriculture Department began implementing the new policy as part of a pilot project in 24 slaughter houses last October, and plans to expand the system nationwide covering poultry, beef and pork. The agency this month extended until Aug. 29 the time for the public to comment on the regulations, and won't issue final rules until after the comments are received.

In 1998, the inspections and safety system reclassified an array of animal diseases as being "defects that rarely or never present a direct public health risk" and said "unaffected carcass portions" could be passed on to consumers by cutting out lesions. Among animal diseases the agency said don't present a health danger are:

- Cancer;
- A pneumonia of poultry called air-sacculitis;
- Glandular swellings or lymphomas;
- Sores;

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- Infectious arthritis;
- Diseases caused by intestinal worms.

In the case of tumors, the guidelines state: "remove localized lesion(s) and pass unaffected carcass portions."

"They just cut off the areas," said Carol Blake, spokeswoman for the Agriculture Department's inspection and safety system. But Jones and consumer groups say production lines are moving so fast that they can't catch all the diseased carcasses, and some are ending up on supermarket shelves.

"When I started inspecting, inspectors were looking at 13 birds a minute, then 40, and now it's 91 birds a minute with three inspectors. You cannot do your job with 91 birds a minute," Jones said. The Agriculture Department is also experimenting with proposed rules that would require federal food inspectors to monitor what the plant employees are doing, rather than inspecting each carcass individually. They are aimed at bringing a new scientific approach to federal meat inspection to cut down on E. coli bacteria and other contamination.

The inspection and safety agency says a survey of pilot plants using the new system concluded that less than 1 percent of the poultry examined at the end of the production line and released for public consumption was unwholesome. At a public hearing on the findings this year, Karen Henderson of Agriculture's division of field operations admitted that defective carcasses are being approved for human use under the pilot program.

"Absolutely. There's no system that we are aware of that is capable of removing every defect from the process," she said. Felicia Nestor, director of the Government Accountability Project, a Washington watchdog group, said the pilot project found chickens with higher levels of fecal and other contamination than in traditional methods of inspecting. "A lot of diseased animals are going out," she said. A. Raymond Randolph, a federal appeals court judge, this month said federal food safety laws require meat and poultry inspectors to examine every carcass that moves through slaughterhouses and processing plants.

"The laws clearly contemplate that when inspections are done, it will be federal inspectors, rather than private employees, who will make the critical determination whether a product is adulterated or unadulterated," he said. "Under the proposed plan, federal inspectors would be inspecting people, not carcasses."

On the Net: The Agriculture Department's Food Safety and Inspection Service <http://www.fsis.usda.gov>. The federal inspector's web site is <http://www.the-inspector.com>