

PolicyPennings by Daryll E. Ray & Harwood D. Schaffer

E. Coli O157:H7 contamination: Now USDA will traceback to slaughter-plant source

On Wednesday, May 2, 2012 the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS), United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), announced a change in how they will respond to positive tests for Shiga Toxin-producing E. coli (STEC) in meat products (<http://ocbmt-creal.usda.gov/player/player.html?base=http://ocbmt-creal.usda.gov/&uri=/USDA/secy&stream=050212>). In the past, FSIS has been criticized for focusing their response to a positive STEC test on the non-slaughter grinding plants where the positive was generated rather than looking at the packing plant where the trim and whole muscle cuts originated.

Identifying the facility that supplied the meat to the downstream plant is called traceback, and smaller facilities that do not slaughter cattle have long-complained that they have had to pay the penalty for problems created elsewhere in the food system.

Currently the USDA has a testing program that tests 13,000 to 15,000 samples a year. Under the procedure announced Wednesday, "USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) intends to implement new traceback measures in order to control pathogens earlier and prevent them from triggering foodborne illnesses and outbreaks. FSIS is proposing to launch traceback investigations earlier and identify additional potentially contaminated product when the Agency finds E. coli O157:H7 through its routine sampling program.

"When FSIS receives an indication of contamination through presumptive positive test results for E. coli, the Agency will move quickly to identify the supplier of the product and any processors who received contaminated product from the supplier, once confirmation is received. This proposed change in policy gives FSIS the opportunity to better prevent contaminated product from reaching consumers."

In the past, not only did the USDA not implement a traceback process, they generally did not even attempt to identify the source of the contaminated material. In several high profile cases and E. coli outbreak con-

tinued for a period of time after it was identified in a downstream plant allowing other plants to continue to grind material from the contaminated lot and put it into commerce.

It was only a year ago that the USDA began to record the name of the supplier of the material that resulted in the positive test. And with this announcement, FSIS has finally made it clear that they will institute traceback to prevent the wider distribution of potentially contaminated meat.

The meat testing process requires that the tested batch must be held until a negative result is returned. In the past the USDA did not begin to react to a presumptive positive, but rather waited until a second (confirmatory) test also returned a positive test result. With the new policy, they will begin to set the traceback wheels in motion while they are conducting the confirmatory test.

In addition to the testing program, E. coli contamination is also identified as the result of illness outbreaks. While it was not discussed at the press conference, presumably, in this case, the USDA will also initiate traceback not only to the grinder, but to the plant supplying the contaminated material.

Once the source of the contamination is identified, the USDA will require the source plant to reassess their disease control measures to see where they may need to be strengthened.

The result of this announcement should result in fewer cases of E. coli illnesses and a safer food supply.

Daryll E. Ray holds the Blasingame Chair of Excellence in Agricultural Policy, Institute of Agriculture, University of Tennessee, and is the Director of UT's Agricultural Policy Analysis Center (APAC). Harwood D. Schaffer is a Research Assistant Professor at APAC. (865) 974-7407; Fax: (865) 974-7298; dray@utk.edu and hdschaffer@utk.edu; <http://www.agpolicy.org>.