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FSIS Issues Notice on Illegally Imported, Smuggled Products

Last Wednesday the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) published Notice 59-06, "Illegally Imported or Smuggled Products," which provides methodologies that the Office of Program Evaluation, Enforcement and Review (OPEER) and the Office of International Affairs (OIA) will apply when surveillance identifies meat, poultry or egg products that have been illegally imported or smuggled into the United States. As defined by the notice, "illegally imported products" are products that may be accurately labeled and properly manifested at the border, but do not meet all requirements for entry into the U.S. (e.g., beef carcasses from an ineligible country). "Smuggled products" are prohibited products that a party fraudulently brings into the U.S. (e.g., chicken from an ineligible country packed into boxes labeled as containing fish). The Notice outlines OPEER Investigator and OIA Import Surveillance Liaison Officers (ISLO) responsibilities, as well as oversight responsibilities of the OPEER Regional Managers. The complete notice is available for review at www.fsis.usda.gov/regulations_&_policies/Notice_59_06/index.asp.

FDA Expands Spinach Recall

Packaged spinach and salad was removed from grocery produce departments across the country Saturday as government researchers pressed on with a complicated search for the source of *E. coli* O157:H7 contamination that has sickened at least 109 people in 19 states and caused one death. Sixteen of those stricken have developed a form of kidney failure called hemolytic uremic syndrome. On Friday, the outbreak was traced to Natural Selection Foods, based in San Juan Bautista, California, and the company voluntarily recalled all products containing spinach. However, Food and Drug Administration (FDA) officials stressed that the bacteria had not been isolated in products sold by Natural Selection Foods, but that the link was established by patient accounts of what they had eaten before becoming ill. Since then, the FDA has recommended that consumers not eat any packages of bagged spinach, bulk spinach, or salad spring mixes containing spinach until further investigations are complete. The FDA and California Department of Health Services planned to work today toward tracing the infected greens to individual farms. The inquiry will review irrigation methods, harvest conditions and other practices at farms possibly involved. The spinach could have been contaminated in the field or during processing or packaging. About 74 percent of the fresh-market spinach grown in the U.S. comes from California, according to the California Farm Bureau Federation. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said Sunday they started an Atlanta-based emergency operations center to help state health agencies with *E. coli* testing. Epidemiologists are helping test spinach samples and stool samples of infected people, according to center spokeswoman Lola Russell. The center is helping when state health agencies can't perform the tests or when a second opinion is needed. Marler Clark, the Seattle law firm that has represented hundreds of victims of *E. coli* outbreaks, has already filed a lawsuit against Dole Food Company, Inc. on behalf of an Oregon woman who became ill after eating Dole brand baby spinach. As more information becomes available, the FDA will continue to update the public. For the latest information, visit the FDA website at www.fda.gov/oc/opacom/hottopics/spinach.html.

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Certified Angus Beef Adjusts Brand Certifications

Responding to beef industry changes and consumer demand, the Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) board of directors recently voted to adjust Certified Angus Beef® (CAB®) brand specifications. In place of a long-standing Yield Grade (YG) 3.9 limit, the brand will use a more specific consistency requirement in the future. As finished cattle weights have steadily increased and beef fabrication styles have evolved, the changes will address uniformity issues that technology has been unable to control. The board voted to adopt a ribeye size bracket of 10 -16 square inches and a carcass weight cap of 1,000 pounds. It also instructed the CAB staff to investigate limits on external fat thickness to refine compositional consistency. CAB staff will discuss the plans with its licensed packers, review existing research and conduct cutting tests before reporting to the Board with a final fat thickness recommendation. Since 1978, the average weight of a U.S. beef carcass has increased by nearly 6 lb. per year, or 165 lb., while the initial YG 3.9 limit remained static. "That limit helped control carcass weight, ribeye size and external fat," said CAB president Jim Riemann. "It maintained a balance of those factors and allowed strength in one or two of those areas, but increasingly, outliers have set back our consistency goals. Yield grade is a cutability indicator for the packer, but it does not give us the product size and weight consistency our licensed retailers and restaurant operators need," said Riemann, who worked several years in the packing industry and as a meat scientist before coming to CAB. Muscling in Angus cattle has kept pace with the trend to heavier weights, but further pressure there could only lead to still heavier weights and ribeyes. "Adjusting our specification is a more appropriate way to address filling the box," said John Stika, CAB vice president for business development. "We will lose at least 6% of the cattle that currently qualify for the brand, but pick up others better suited to the needs of our customers." Limits on fat thickness will serve to eliminate the problem outliers. Investigating those limits should address cutability concerns not met by today's fabrication styles and the other newly refined CAB specifications, he said. One key challenge Stika noted is the inconsistent relationship between trim fat and the kernel fat that has been a problem across all YG classes for all brands. "It will always be a challenge for cattle to meet the CAB marbling specifications, simply because the brand demands the best in Angus cattle," said Larry Corah, CAB vice president for supply development and packing. He added, "Angus producers will now have a ribeye target, rather than simply 'bigger,' and a logic for developing balanced growth and carcass genetic packages." Stika noted that CAB specifications have seen minor adjustments in the past, to better screen out dairy and *bos indicus* genetic types, and to reflect changes in technology and fabrication practices. Just last summer, the Board voted to adjust the brand's live specification to allow evaluation of all AngusSource® program calves, regardless of hide color. CAB would be the first Angus brand to adopt a ribeye and carcass weight standard. Nearly three-quarters of Angus brands certified by the USDA have no yield or uniformity specification. The brand's executive team is expected to determine a back-fat recommendation by mid-November. The Board will then approve a final form of the new specification and petition USDA for the change. Riemann said CAB would work closely with USDA and licensed packers to ensure a smooth transition to using the new specifications at all licensed plants.



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Briefly . . .

FSIS Solicits Nominations for NACMPI: FSIS published a Federal Register notice on September 12, to announce that USDA is soliciting nominations for membership on the National Advisory Committee on Meat and Poultry Inspection. The full committee consists of no less than 16 and no more than 18 members, and each person selected is expected to serve a two-year term. Existing members can serve three consecutive two-year terms. USDA is soliciting nominations to fill 16 to 18 vacancies on the committee. The agency is accepting nominations until October 12. Nominations should be submitted by electronic mail to NACMPI@fsis.usda.gov, or by mail to Dr. Barbara Masters, Administrator, FSIS, USDA, in care of the advisory committee specialist, Room 405 Aerospace Building, 901 D Street, SW, Washington, D.C. 20250-3700, or by fax to 202-690-6519.

USDA Reconsidering Older Canadian Cattle Imports: After meeting last Wednesday with Canadian Minister of Agriculture Chuck Strahl, USDA Secretary Mike Johanns said the rule allowing older Canadian cattle into the U.S. hasn't been stopped "dead in its tracks." In July, USDA pulled the plan that would have allowed imports of cattle over 30 months of age, when a 50-month-old Canadian cow was found to have BSE. Johanns said USDA was reconsidering the rule but he doesn't expect a "long, long delay" in re-issuing it.

FSIS Issues Notice on Nationwide Young Chicken Microbiological Baseline Data Collection Program: FSIS issued Notice 60-06 on September 14 to provide information to inspection program personnel at establishments participating in the FSIS Nationwide Microbiological Baseline Data Collection Program for Young Chickens. This notice applies to the 90-day training period that will be conducted before the actual study begins. The notice is available on the FSIS website at www.fsis.usda.gov/OPPDE/rdad/FSISNotices/60-06.pdf.

FSIS Extends Comment Period on BSE Risk Assessment: The time for commenting on the updated Harvard Risk Assessment of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) has been extended by the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS). Comments will now be accepted until October 27, 2006. FSIS extended the comment period in response to a suggestion submitted after the agency's July 25, 2006 technical meeting. For additional information, go to <http://a257.g.akamaitech.net/7/257/2422/01jan20061800/edocket.access.gpo.gov/2006/E6-15017.htm>.

Does Your HACCP Plan Need An Update? Are You Ready for an FSIS Team Review?

Register now for "Beyond Basics: HACCP Plan Improvement Workshop for Raw and Cooked Product Operations,"

hosted by SMA, NMA, and the Texas A&M University Department of Animal Science, November 30 - December 1, 2006 at TAMU's Kleberg Center in College Station, Texas. This workshop will provide a review and evaluation of your company's HACCP plan, with hands-on help to improve it. Registration information and course outline are available on the SMA web site, or by contacting the SMA office.

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