

# A New Label at the Meatcase?

USDA proposes labels for mechanically tenderized meat.

by Kindra Gordon, field editor

**T**wenty-six percent of all the beef sold in the United States is mechanically tenderized. This process involves forcing hundreds of tiny blades or needles through the meat to break up muscle fibers and make it more tender.

However, it can also create a food-safety risk by driving pathogens that might be on the surface, such as *E. coli* O157:H7, into the meat cut's interior — where cooking may not reach high enough temperatures to kill them.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, there were five *E. coli* outbreaks attributed to mechanically tenderized beef between 2003 and 2009, sickening 174 people, four of whom died. Recalls and outbreaks tied to tenderized product have continued to occur, with the most recent being the XL Meats incident in Canada in 2012.

As a result of these food-safety concerns and pressure from consumer advocacy groups, in early June 2013 the USDA's Food Safety Inspection Service (FSIS) published an interim rule proposing that mechanically tenderized beef be labeled as such. Additionally, the labels would include instructions to cook the meat to an internal temperature of at least 145° F, then allow it to sit for at least three minutes after it is taken off the heat to ensure any potential pathogens are killed.

It was outbreaks of *E. coli* O157:H7 from hamburgers that led the USDA to require

## Comment closes

Published to USDA's *Federal Register* on June 10, 2013, the interim rule, which is officially titled "Descriptive Designation for Needle- or blade-tenderized (Mechanically Tenderized) Beef Products," was subject to a 60-day comment period. After reviewing comments, USDA aims to implement a final version next year. View the full rule at: <http://1.usa.gov/133lzyV>.



testing of ground beef, as well as efforts to convince Americans to cook their burgers thoroughly. Even though blade- and needle-tenderized beef carries much the same danger, it is not required to be labeled.

In a news statement, USDA Undersecretary Elisabeth Hagen explained why this new labeling of mechanically tenderized meat product is viewed as necessary: "When people buy cube steak, you see the marks where the machinery has cubed up the steak. When people buy ground beef, they know they're getting ground product. But when people order this product, they don't know. And certainly, when people are ordering in a restaurant, they don't know they're ordering this product."

She added, "A lot of people want a medium-rare steak. But if folks knew that the steak they're buying might not be what they think it is, and might be in a higher-risk category, they might want it well-done."

Currently, Costco does voluntarily label the mechanically tenderized beef it sells as "blade tenderized."

## Research efforts

Mindy Brashears is a professor of food microbiology and food safety at Texas Tech University who has conducted several studies with needle tenderization of meat product. She says research is continuing — and needs to continue — to learn more about the transfer of pathogens with mechanized tenderization and protocols that may be utilized to lessen the risk to food safety.

Specifically, Brashears explains some of the research she is conducting is focused on interventions to minimize the risk of pathogens in tenderized products.



**Editor's Note:** Kindra Gordon is a cattleman and freelance writer from Whitewood, S.D.

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