



NATIONAL MEAT ASSOCIATION®

1970 Broadway, Suite 825, Oakland, CA 94612
Ph. (510) 763-1533 or (202) 667-2108 • Fax (510) 763-6186
staff@nmaonline.org • <http://www.nmaonline.org>

December 30, 2009

Letter to the Editor

USA Today

Re: Schools could learn lessons on food safety December 30, 2009

Investigative reporters Elizabeth Weise and Peter Eisler have told a lengthy story in their narrative, coupled it with the views of several biased “experts”, and failed to really tell the reading public the whole story about how millions of school children consume literally millions of meals every school day without which they would be very hungry or even starving.

School feeding systems are not quick-serve restaurants. The Agricultural Marketing Service of USDA buys meat, chicken and other foods to meet requests it receives from its sister agency, the Food Nutrition Service, and FNS works with commodity groups, such as the ACDA and ASFSA which in turn work with local school districts who submit requests for the products. All this is accomplished pursuant to the Agricultural Marketing Act which provides funding.

In its purchasing arrangements, USDA/AMS establishes strict vendor requirements that must be met. The ground beef purchased must be tested for both E. coli O157:H7 and Salmonella and be found negative. Although other large scale buyers of ground beef may have different testing protocols that they rely on, testing is only a verification step in the comprehensive system required by AMS. For example, the AMS special requirements begin with the live animal prior to harvesting and continue at every critical point throughout processing up to delivery of the frozen product. Further, when vendors are producing this product, a USDA grader must be present during all production activities to ensure that the product meets the strict specifications set by the agency. Vendors who fail to meet the standard are not entitled to participate in the program.

USDA/AMS seeks out smaller companies to participate. Yes, all participants bid and contracts are awarded to the lowest cost, but the product must meet the quality standards and be produced under inspection by another federal agency, USDA’s Food Safety & Inspection Service.

When product is received by school districts, they have the option to complete the food preparation at schools, or to contract with a USDA-inspected establishment to cook the product and deliver to them for ready-serving. Both methods of delivery work well, depending on location, school budgets and the ability of individual schools to have food preparation kitchen availability.

The tracking of product through this system is complicated but works well. It is not difficult to identify and recover product at any stage of the system. There has not been a major outbreak of illness associated with school foodservice meals for a long time.

The investigative reporters have told a story – but not the whole story. They totally overlooked the extensive efforts by the meat industry to eliminate pathogens from the meat supply. The testing required by both private food service companies and USDA pale in comparison to the testing and overall intervention systems employed by wholesale suppliers of ground beef. The reporters fail to give any attribution of the commitment of both the industry and the government workers throughout the distribution system who are committed to ensuring the safety of food for our children. This is a travesty.

Sincerely,

Rosemary Mucklow
Executive Director