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The Safety of Meat in the School Lunch Program

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In recent years it has become the popular pastime of journalists and industry critics to focus their investigations and criticism on the National School Lunch Program. But what they are attacking is a solid program with a proven track record of responsibly providing safe, high-quality products to school children for more than 70 years.

Today's Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) purchase program was born in Section 32 of the Act of August 24, 1935. Section 32 provides a permanent appropriation of funds the best-known of which is for the commodity purchases, primarily on behalf of school food programs, that began in 1938. AMS is responsible to assure the safety, wholesomeness and quality of the purchases made for the program.

From the beginning the program took children's dietary needs into consideration. The Dietary Guidelines for Americans became the standard for the school lunch program in 1995. Soon after, the program introduced new, extremely rigid food safety specifications, modeled after standards used by leading fast food restaurants, best industry practices and available science that went far beyond the minimum requirements of safety.

Beginning in 2003, AMS established a statistically based vendor certification and supply chain quality management program specifically for the purchase of ground beef. The program – which includes testing for *Salmonella* and *E. coli* O157:H7 and doesn't accept any product that does not test negative – has enjoyed considerable success in reducing pathogen levels (and controlling fat content) in the ground beef provided to our nation's school children.

Under the program, Meat Grading and Certification (MGC) Branch agents enforce continuous auditing and in-plant monitoring as long as a contractor is in the program. Microbial levels are monitored for process assessment purposes on a daily basis.

Last year, AMS took things even a step further by requiring that all contractors have a humane handling plan implemented in their establishment so that any harvest facility that they buy from is first shown to meet stringent animal welfare guidelines and audits. All in all, the School Lunch Program is one of the most effective programs in the country for producing safe beef and something participants of which are rightly proud.

NMA is proud that many of its small and mid-sized members meet the rigid requirements of the AMS Vendor Program, and are regular suppliers.
