

LIKE CALVES TO THE SLAUGHTER

By Ann Cooper and Kate Adamick

On Sunday, the USDA took action to force the recall of 143 million pounds of beef dating back two years -- the largest beef recall in our country's history. More than 25% of the recalled beef was distributed free of charge through the USDA's commodity food program to about 150 school districts across the nation. Undoubtedly, most of this potentially tainted beef has already been eaten by the 30 million children who participate in the National School Lunch Program every day. Clearly, the USDA is not protecting our children.

According to its own website, the USDA's strategic plan explicitly sets out "key activities" that include "improving nutrition and health by providing food assistance." This food assistance takes the form of cheaply produced food products that are purchased in mass quantities by the federal government from large industrial agribusinesses and given to schools and other federal nutrition programs that help feed our nation's poorest citizens. If this were the only key activity of the USDA, it could arguably be viewed as a noble use of federal resources. However, attempting to improve nutrition through such food assistance programs directly clashes with the USDA's parallel activities of "expanding markets for agricultural products" and "enhancing food safety by taking steps to reduce the prevalence of foodborne hazards." How can the same agency be responsible for expanding markets, improving nutrition, and insuring food safety without sacrificing one priority for another?

The all too real consequences of these conflicts of interest became appallingly obvious when the Humane Society released its undercover video of the horrific slaughtering practices at the Westland/Hallmark meat company in Chino, California, a company that received the "Supplier of the Year" award from the National School Lunch Program in 2004-05. But while violently forcing disabled cows to their feet prior to slaughter in order to meet federal guidelines may nauseate even the most ardent carnivore, the role of the USDA in this process is even more unconscionable. It was not until after the horrific video was released to the media that the embarrassed USDA withdrew its inspectors from the Westland/Hallmark plant, thereby forcing the company to issue the recall. This raises the obvious and shocking question of why the onsite USDA inspectors didn't stop the illegal practices before they were secretly filmed and publicly exposed.

The USDA's excuse that this case was "an isolated incident of egregious violations" is as lame as the cows that were subjected to the inhumane treatment. The 21 recalls of beef related to the potentially deadly strain of E. coli last year alone is proof enough that the USDA is incapable of ensuring the safety of the food produced by the industrial agricultural system that it exists to support.

The symptoms of Mad Cow Disease, also known as bovine spongiform encephalopathy, often take ten or more years to develop. Consequently, it may be decades before we know whether the conduct of Westland/Hallmark will cause a particularly insidious foodborne illness that will prematurely end the lives of today's children by eating away at their brains. In the meantime, it is incumbent upon the United States Congress to remove the responsibility for ensuring food safety from the USDA's jurisdiction and place it with an agency that is not simultaneously promoting and distributing the very products to be inspected. And we, as voters, must challenge Senators Clinton, Obama and McCain to propose viable recommendations for repairing a national food system so fundamentally flawed as to put our children's health at risk on a daily basis. Until that happens, our children will continue to move through the school lunch lines like calves to the slaughter.

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