

OPINION

Do your part to prevent foodborne illness



College Farmer

By Katie Allen

IN late September, the Topps Meat Co. of New Jersey faced a fatal blow to its 67-year business. The company recalled nearly 22 million pounds of ground beef — the second largest beef recall in U.S. history. More than 30 people in eight states had *E. coli* O157:H7 infections traced to the beef. And aside from those helping USDA investigate the contamination, most of the company's 87 employees are now out of work.

I read a report that, as of late October, the U.S. has had 15 food recalls related to *E. coli* in beef this year. Eight of those recalls were related to human illness. There were eight total recalls in 2006 with no illnesses and an even fewer number of cases in 2005.

I currently write and anchor the farm report on KOMU-TV in Columbia, and

Key Points

- There have been more beef recalls in 2007 than in the past two years.
- U.S. government is implementing new rules to test for food pathogens.
- Consumers can prevent foodborne illness with proper handling and cooking.

it seems like I have at least one recall story a week as part of my report. With all the recalls in the news — vegetables, beef patties, potpies and pizzas — it's no wonder consumers are uneasy about the food supply.

Nearly a month passed before officials announced they had traced the source of the Topps contaminated beef to the Canadian company Rancher's Beef Ltd. The USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service, along with the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, sourced that contamination and ceased production in the plant. The FSIS banned meat shipment from the company on Oct. 20.

That same month, the FSIS began im-

plementing additional requirements for imported meat and poultry products from Canada. The requirements include more tests for salmonella and *E. coli*. Shipments from Canada will wait at the border until they test negative of these pathogens.

Additionally, processing plants will incur more sampling and spot checks, and a new test beginning in January will help find lower levels of *E. coli* in raw meats. Other countries that ship beef to the U.S. will have to conduct sampling measures similar to our food system.

Time to react

The government is doing its part. Still, consumers can also take precautions to protect themselves from food illness.

Ground-beef products should always be cooked to an internal temperature of 160 degrees F. Consumers should wash their hands after handling raw beef, as well as countertops and utensils in contact with it. Consider using different cutting boards for raw meat and veg-

etables. Bacteria can get into the cracks of a cutting board, which can be dangerous if it is not cleaned properly. Do not place cooked hamburgers on the same plate used for the raw meat patties. Wash fresh vegetables well before eating, and drink pasteurized milk, juice and cider.

Just a few simple measures could make a big difference. People in agriculture need to help educate the consumer as consumers themselves, providing others with ways to guard against food illness and reassuring others that our food supply is the safest in the world.

To find out more about protection from foodborne illnesses, check out these Web sites: www.fsis.usda.gov and extension.missouri.edu. Safety tips about beef specifically can be found on the educational links of the Missouri Beef Industry Council's Web site, www.mobeeff.org.

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'Free lunch' may end soon for illegal labor

Commentary



By DAN CRUMMETT

OKLAHOMA enacted a tough anti-illegal-immigration law Nov. 1 to fill the void left by congressional inaction.

While Hispanic political organizations and several church groups are calling the measure "racist," it addresses an issue of great concern to a growing number of legal United States residents fed up with the flaunting of immigration laws by hordes of illegals crossing into the country, and by businesses profiting from the cheaper, undocumented labor.

In essence, the law makes it a felony to harbor or knowingly employ illegals, and empowers local police and sheriff's departments to become involved in the country-of-origin status of anyone arrested.

Root of the problem

Oklahoma's law is probably one of the toughest of several similar state-enacted measures because it strikes at the source of the problem — employment. As the Oklahoma lawmaker who introduced the bill explained, "If there are no jobs for them in Oklahoma, then illegals will go elsewhere."

That they did. More than a month before the bill became law, published reports stated that hundreds of undocumented individuals were leaving Oklahoma, mainly for Texas and

California. A close friend of mine who works in a publicly funded health-care facility that deals primarily with illegal immigrants said patients had been moving on for weeks. Then, the day the law took effect, she said the halls at the facility were empty.

News reports were filled with horror stories of the "fear" these people felt in face of the new law — a situation that fails to impress me as I still do not understand what many in this nation, in our own Congress and in Mexico don't understand about the word "illegal." It's unambiguous; it means "it's against the law" — the same body of rules and regulations I am expected to obey, or suffer the consequences.

Now, it's estimated 12 million illegals are in this nation because they came here to work in farm fields and in other

jobs legal citizens of the U.S. may not want to fill. That does not change the "illegal" status, nor give anyone in law enforcement or legislative authority the right to turn a blind eye to the practice. While much of the fresh produce in the U.S. comes from fields staffed with these folks, employing illegals should be illegal. And, despite the financial burden American agriculture will feel if field labor has to be paid at a rate sufficient to attract legal residents, the investment must be made. If it is not, then which set of laws will we begin ignoring next?

Yes, producers with perishable produce in the field will be in a crunch, but ultimately the U.S. consumer must begin paying the freight for goods produced "legally." That will mean a much higher price to pay for the labor — finally.