

USDA Finalizes Rule to Enhance Consumer Protection, Ensure Retailers Can Track Sources of Ground Meats

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WASHINGTON, Dec. 14, 2015 – The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) today announced a new measure that will improve the agency’s ability to determine the source of foodborne illnesses linked to ground beef, stopping foodborne illness outbreaks sooner when they occur. Based on lessons learned from previous outbreak investigations, FSIS is requiring that all makers of raw ground beef products keep adequate records of the source material, so that the agency can quickly work with the suppliers to recall contaminated product.

Outbreak investigations can be hindered when retail stores produce ground beef by mixing product from various sources but fail to keep clear records that would allow investigators to determine which supplier produced the unsafe product. This new requirement complements expedited [traceback and traceforward procedures](#) announced in August 2014 that enhance the agency’s ability to quickly and broadly investigate food safety breakdowns in the event of an outbreak connected to ground beef.

“This is a common-sense step that can prevent foodborne illness and increase consumer confidence when they purchase ground beef,” said Deputy Under Secretary for Food Safety Al Almanza. “In the event that unsafe product does make it into commerce, these new procedures will give us the information we need to act much more effectively to keep families across the country safe.”

Under the new final rule, FSIS is amending its recordkeeping regulations to require that all official establishments and retail stores that grind raw beef products maintain the following records: the establishment numbers of establishments supplying material used to prepare each lot of raw ground beef product; all supplier lot numbers and production dates; the names of the supplied materials, including beef components and any materials carried over from one production lot to the next; the date and time each lot of raw ground beef product is produced; and the date and time when grinding equipment and other related food-contact surfaces are cleaned and sanitized. These requirements also apply to raw beef products that are ground at an individual customer’s request when new source materials are used.

“The traceback mechanism provided for in this final rule will facilitate recall efforts that could stop outbreaks and prevent additional foodborne illnesses,” said Deputy Under Secretary for Food Safety Brian Ronholm. “USDA is committed to providing resources and assistance to makers of ground beef to ensure they can be a part of this important and essential new public health measure.”

Retail stores regularly produce raw ground beef for consumer sales by mixing cuts of beef from various sources. A 2011 *Salmonella* outbreak in Maine and parts of the northeastern region of the United States resulted in illnesses that could have been prevented if establishments had kept records of suppliers on file. As a result of this outbreak, on July 22, 2014, FSIS published a proposed rule (79 FR 42464) to require official establishments and retail stores to maintain records of their suppliers and source materials received. After receiving and considering comments, FSIS is announcing this final recordkeeping rule that ensures that public health officials have the ability to quickly search records to identify the exact source of the raw beef products during outbreak investigations.

The final rule can be viewed at: www.fsis.usda.gov/wps/portal/fsis/topics/regulations/federal-register/interim-and-final-rules.

Over the past six years, USDA has collaborated extensively with other federal partners to safeguard America's food supply, prevent foodborne illnesses and improve consumers' knowledge about the food they eat. USDA’s FSIS is working [to strengthen federal food safety efforts](#) and develop strategies that emphasize a three-dimensional approach to prevent foodborne illness: prioritizing prevention; strengthening surveillance and enforcement; and improving response and recovery. Other steps taken to improve the safety of ground beef specifically include adopting a zero-tolerance policy for raw beef products containing six additional strains of shiga-toxin producing *E. coli*, *expanding testing procedures for additional components of ground beef*, and *improving employee training to detect and reduce E. coli O157:H7 contamination on beef carcasses*.

Consumers with food safety questions can "Ask Karen," the FSIS virtual representative available 24 hours a day at AskKaren.gov or via smartphone at m.askkaren.gov. The toll-free USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline 1-888-MPHotline (1-888-674-6854) is available in English and Spanish and can be reached from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. (Eastern Time) Monday through Friday. Recorded food safety messages are available 24 hours a day. The online Electronic Consumer Complaint Monitoring System can also be accessed 24 hours a day at: www.fsis.usda.gov/reportproblem.