

SAFE FOOD COALITION

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Date: June 12, 2009

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

In recent years, several outbreaks and illnesses have been associated with mechanically tenderized (MT) meat products. These products, such as steaks and roasts, have been tenderized through a process that repeatedly inserts small needles or blades into the product. These needles or blades pierce the surface of the product increasing the risk that any pathogens located on the surface of the product can be transferred to the interior of the product.

FSIS classifies a product to be non-intact if the product has been injected or if its surface has been pierced. Therefore, MT beef and pork products are non-intact products, even though many MT non-intact meat products look like intact products.

Currently, FSIS does not require MT non-intact meat products to be identified. Therefore, consumers and retail outlets, such as restaurants, do not know whether the products they have purchased are intact or MT non-intact meat products. In addition, FSIS' current advice to consumers and retail outlets about cooking temperatures for products, such as steaks and roasts, does not differentiate between intact products and MT non-intact products. As a result, consumers and retail outlets do not have sufficient information to assure that these products are cooked to an appropriate and safe temperature.

We have now entered the grilling season. Grilling is a safe method for killing pathogens on the surface of meat products since grilling sears the surface with high, intense heat. However, searing the surface does not provide uniform, high heat to the interior of meat products. Therefore, when grilling ground meat or MT non-intact meat products, consumers need to know that these products require longer cooking times, accompanied by higher instant-read temperatures, to prevent foodborne illness.

We urge you to act immediately to address this important public health issue by beginning consumer and retail education, and initiating regulatory action to require labeling of these products. These recommendations are enumerated in detail in the following background memorandum. It is critical for consumers and retail outlets to have the information necessary to safely prepare these products.

Sincerely,

Patricia Buck
Center for Foodborne Illness Research & Prevention

Michael Jacobson
Center for Science in the Public Interest

Chris Waldrop
Consumer Federation of America

Wenonah Hauter
Food & Water Watch