



October 14, 2009

Attribute this statement to J. Patrick Boyle, president and CEO, American Meat Institute

“Each and every day that our businesses are open, we are focused on producing beef that is as safe as it possibly can be because this benefits our customers, our families and our businesses. If we could eliminate *E. coli* O157:H7 in ground beef by passing a bill in Congress, we would have insisted that such legislation be enacted years ago.

Unfortunately, it’s not that easy.

Although we appreciate the intent of Senator Gillibrand’s recently announced bill, it is certainly not a food safety silver bullet and would actually duplicate the millions of tests currently being conducted by the meat industry.

The most effective way to address *E. coli* O157:H7 and other invisible germs is to use food safety strategies throughout the production process, from the farm to the table. By erecting multiple “bacteria roadblocks” throughout the production and distribution system, such as hide cleaners, carcass washes, and steam pasteurization cabinets, ensuring proper refrigeration during distribution and maintaining careful separation of raw and cooked foods and proper cooking of ground beef in restaurants and home kitchens, there is a far better chance of product safety than additional testing for invisible pathogens will provide.

It is through these numerous plant interventions and new interventions - like carcass irradiation which is pending review and approval at USDA - that the meat industry can even further reduce the current less than one-half of one percent level of *E. coli* O157:H7 in raw beef products. Companies producing ground beef use tests to demonstrate that their pathogen prevention programs are working effectively. A test cannot make beef safe, however. It is important to be clear about what testing can and cannot do before mandates are suggested by lawmakers.

Testing has its limits for a number of reasons:

- **The test result is only a sample.** When it comes to ground beef, for example, a measured sample of the ground beef ingredients is pulled from a container of beef. That sample is sent to a lab and tested. The testing process destroys the sample. When the results come back, the document explaining the test results will sometimes say something such as “These results apply only to the sample that was tested.” Sampling other portions of the container may yield a different result.

- **A negative test result does not mean the product is clear of contamination.**
Negative tests are good news, but are not a guarantee by any means, because they only represent a sampling of the whole product.
- **The product in the grocery store has been sampled not tested.** Despite the fact that USDA and the industry takes thousands of ground beef samples and tests them for *E. coli*, there is really no tested product in the marketplace because the product is destroyed during the testing process.

Food safety is the meat industry's top priority. We are selling a raw product, however, and raw products by their nature may contain harmful bacteria. That's why we are committed to providing consumers the information that they need to handle and cook ground beef safely.”

-#-