

School lunch suppliers to face new animal welfare requirements

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Any meat processing company wanting to be part of the USDA's National School Lunch Program, after July 1, would have to conduct performance-based audits under the agency's draft animal welfare requirements.

The USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service is intent on ratcheting up its standards for school lunch contractors following the widespread publicity surrounding the beef recall at Westland/Hallmark, previously an acclaimed participant in the program. AMS's list of new standards, available at:

<http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMsv1.0/getfile?dDocName=STELPRDC5069655> , would require contractors maintain:

- A mission statement on animal handling, which is distributed to all employees and also conspicuously displayed at the premises;
- A training program, which is provided to all employees interacting with animals and conducted no less than once a year for each employee;
- Signed documentation indicating that each employee has completed the required training;
- Written and enforced policies at their processing facilities that preclude non-ambulatory animals from the harvest facility premises; and
- Written quality management plans, which includes performance-based audits of the premises, at their facilities.

Rather than go through a formal rulemaking process, however, AMS says its recently drafted new standards are being implemented as revisions to its individual product specifications and contractual provisions with vendors. Comments, which were due May 30, are currently being evaluated but are not available for review by the public, a USDA official tells Food Chemical News.

AAMP: Requirements should apply to other livestock services, too

Participation in the school lunch program is something to be coveted. In fiscal year 2007, 21 different vendors supplied beef to the national school lunch program. They were paid as much as \$223.9 million to supply 149.98 million pounds of beef.

In FY 2007, before getting kicked out of the program, Westland provided the program with 27.13 million pounds of beef, worth \$39.4 million to the company.

But how much of an impact animal welfare requirements will have on the program remains to be seen, says a skeptical Jay Wenter, executive director of the American

Association of Meat Processors. Regulations have focused almost exclusively on the processing sector, which is only one sector within of the meat industry, he says. To be effective, the USDA should also better regulate livestock producers. For example, the USDA should ensure that livestock producers are providing water to animals en route to processing facilities.

"The meat industry is essentially the only industry that is under complete inspection by a governmental entity with the industry being under extensive oversight," Wenter says. "So if any industry, other than the meat industry gets out of line, it is us [the meat industry] that suffers stricter regulations. Not the guilty party that should have the enforcement action taken against them. There are many industries that participate in the handling of livestock (i.e., sale barns, livestock transportation services, farms, veterinarian facilities, etc.), but regulation is extensive and non-uniformly placed on the one industry...the meat industry."

— Shawna Bligh

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