

New 18-hour test speeds antibiotic meat check

NEW YORK, N.Y. — Although the U.S. Department of Agriculture's "Swab Test on the Premises" is known as "STOP," this quick test for antibiotics has become a "go" signal to speed the inspection process in meat plants throughout the country.

"By using the test, USDA inspectors can know within 18 hours whether carcasses of dairy cows have traces of antibiotics," said Ralph Johnston, chief of microbiology for USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service. "It used to be a week or two before the test results were available."

"USDA veterinarians test for antibiotics when they see animals with signs of infection or with injection marks which could mean antibiotic treatment shortly before the animals were marketed," Johnston said.

Before the swab test was available, inspectors had to hold a suspect carcass at the slaughter house for a week to two weeks

while tissue samples were mailed to a laboratory for analysis and results mailed back to the plant.

"Now, when inspectors suspect an animal has been treated with antibiotics, they use STOP," Johnston said. "They have an answer within 18 hours."

If the test shows no antibiotics, the carcass can move on into commerce.

"When antibiotics are found in the kidney — the first tissue tested — then inspectors use the screening test on muscle tissue," Johnston said. "If the meat is positive, then the carcass is held until samples are sent to an FSIS laboratory for analysis by more definite procedures. The carcass isn't condemned unless violations are confirmed by the laboratory."

Not only is the swab test fast — it's simple, accurate and inexpensive, Johnston said.

"Inspectors insert an ordinary sterile cotton swab into a kidney, liver or muscle tissue — then put

the swab on a bacterial culture plate," Johnston said. "If antibiotics are present, the bacteria on the plate stop growing and an easy-to-see zone is left around the swab."

"Before the STOP program began, special USDA agencies teamed up with industry associations and state officials to tell dairy farmers about the problem of antibiotic residues in meat," Johnston said. "The problem occurs when cows are marketed too soon after treatment with the drugs."

"The response to the educational effort was immediate," Johnston said. "Within months, the team effort began to pay-off. Violations began to decline. In 1978, before the program was initiated, antibiotics were found in about 3.7 percent of animals tested. By 1980, the figure dropped dramatically to 1.2 percent."

"Once dairy farmers became familiar with the problem, their

practices changed," said Johnston. "Holding animals for the needed withdrawal time after giving antibiotics has meant fewer animals with the problem are being sent to slaughter."

The screening test was developed by microbiologists at FSIS's Methods Development Laboratory in Beltsville, Md. "Before we distributed it, we first made sure it was accurate and rugged enough for field use," said Johnston.

"In less than two years, its use has spread from two trial plants to approximately 500 plants — including all the major ones dealing with dairy cows in 44 states," said Johnston. "Inspectors are now using it in a limited way for other types of beef cattle and veal calves as well."

A 1980 survey proved the test's reliability, Johnston said.

"Of the nearly 2,000 samples testing negative — no antibiotics — with the swab test only one ac-

tually proved to contain such drugs upon re-testing with more exact laboratory methods," Johnston said. "But even that one sample did not contain violative levels."

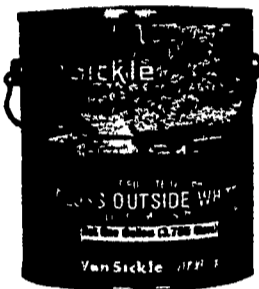
"The test's practicality is only one reason the STOP program has been successful," said Johnston. "More important has been the cooperative spirit between dairy farmers and government officials. The outcome has been a speedier inspection process and better animal husbandry. These improvements benefit everyone — from producer to processor to consumer."



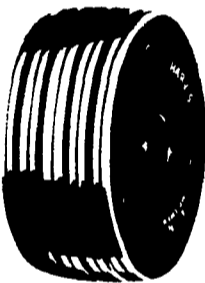
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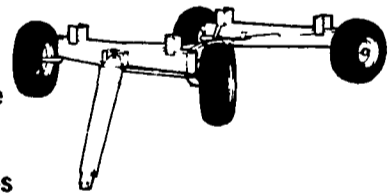


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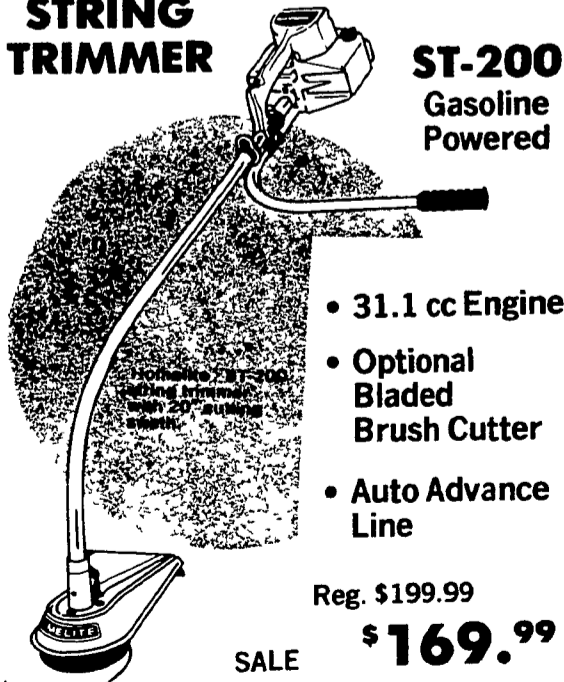
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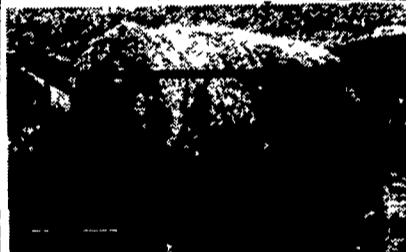
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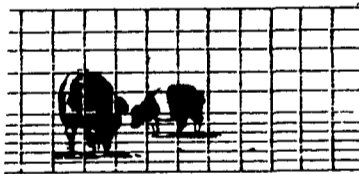
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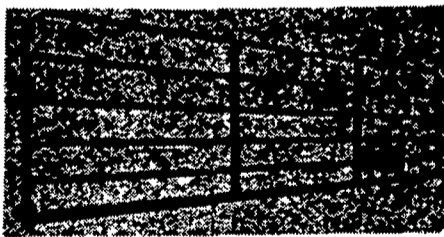
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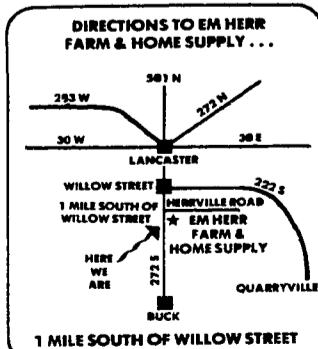
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