

USDA proposes changes in mechanically processed meats

WASHINGTON, D.C. — The U.S. Department of Agriculture has proposed changing composition, labeling and use requirements for mechanically processed meat product to expand market acceptance, according to C.W. McMillan, assistant secretary for marketing and transportation services.

"Mechanically processed meat product is apparently not now being used in meat products sold at retail," McMillan said. "This means that a source of wholesome food, made possible by expanding technology, is untapped. Furthermore, productivity is being lost because specialized machinery is not being used.

"We hope requirements can be changed to make it easier for processors to market the product, while continuing to assure that finished items containing it as an

ingredient are safe, wholesome and accurately labeled," McMillan said.

Mechanically processed meat product is produced from red meat animals such as cattle and hogs. Beef or pork carcasses or parts are hand-trimmed of meat before being broken up and pushed under high pressure through specialized equipment with pinpoint openings. The openings allow meat, along with a small amount of finely powdered bone, to pass through. The product, which has a spread-like consistency, can be used in many finished meat products, such as cooked sausages.

The proposal includes these provisions:

—Current limits on bone particle size, bone content and protein quality would be retained, as would requirements for handling controls and USDA-approved

quality control systems. The proposal would clarify that calcium is a measure of bone content.

—The name of the product, currently "Mechanically Processed (Species) Product," would be changed. Example: "Mechanically Processed Beef Product." Names under consideration include "Mechanically Processed (Species)," "Mechanically Separated (Species)," "Mechanically Deboned (Species)" and "Mechanically Recovered (Species)." Example: "Mechanically Recovered Beef."

—The new product name would be listed in the statement of ingredients for products in which it is an ingredient, but not next to the product name on all finished products, as now required.

—The labels of certain finished

products containing the mechanically processed product as an ingredient would be required to declare their calcium content. This provision would replace the current requirement that the names of all finished products be qualified with a statement of their powdered bone content.

—The first category would have to satisfy current limits on fat and protein (minimum of 14 percent protein and maximum of 30 percent fat). However, it could be used in greater amounts than now permitted provided calcium was significantly reduced. Thus, finished products would contain no more bone than they do now.

—The second category of product would not have to meet any requirements for fat or protein content, and could be used in products — such as certain types of sausages — in which total fat content is limited by existing regulations. Thus, the fat content of finished products would not be increased by use of the mechanically processed product.

—The product still could not be used in certain products in deference to special dietary considerations and to protect product quality. For example, as a precaution, USDA does not allow the product to be used in baby foods to avoid adding fluoride to infant diets.

Before the current requirements went into effect in 1978, an expert panel of government scientists

reviewed the product and concluded it could be used safely if properly regulated.

The issue was one of several targeted for review in early 1981 in an effort to reduce unnecessarily burdensome regulations. However, McMillan said USDA began to review mechanical processing requirements earlier in response to industry contentions that existing requirements have prevented production and marketing of the product, which industry refers to as "mechanically deboned meat."

Most recently this position was taken in a petition submitted to USDA by the American Meat Institute and the Pacific Coast Meat Association. It describes the current labeling requirements as misleading and the compositional requirements as unreasonable.

The proposal was scheduled to appear in the July 31 Federal Register, found in many local public libraries. Comments will be accepted for 90 days, until October 29.



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