

USDA Proposes Changes To Meat, Poultry Processing Program

WASHINGTON, D.C.— The U.S. Department of Agriculture is proposing changes in its meat and poultry inspection program to implement a recent law which authorizes USDA to adjust the intensity among processing plants. USDA would use records of plant compliance with federal food safety and processing regulations to determine inspection frequency.

"Under the proposal, USDA would increase inspection at processing plants where records indicate a need for additional oversight. By the same token, plants with good records of compliance could be visited less than daily," said Lester M. Crawford, administrator of USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service.

The proposed rule would not apply to slaughter operations, which will remain under continuous inspection.

Congress amended the federal Meat Inspection Act in 1986, requiring USDA to alter its current daily inspection of processing plants. The legislation allows the frequency of inspections to be based on the risks posed by each plant's compliance record, the complexity of the processes it performs, and its ability to control hazards. The National Academy of Sciences has also recommended making such changes,

Crawford said. "The proposed changes would strengthen USDA's inspection in the 6,300 plants that process meat and poultry by focusing inspection efforts where they are needed most," said Crawford. "The proposal is based on years of careful planning and three pilot tests in different parts of the country in various kinds of meat and poultry plants."

The proposed program would utilize a new computerized system that accumulates information from inspection visits. The system would document each plant's

record in meeting USDA requirements, keeping track of acceptable and deficient performance. Aided by these records, USDA would decide the frequency of inspection needed at a given plant.

"Industry will have to assume greater responsibility in conforming to USDA standards, because critical deficiencies found during inspection would mean production delays and product condemnation," Crawford said. "With the proposed changes, USDA inspection of meat and poultry would remain the most intense system of

inspection for any food produced."

The proposal would not change any standards for the processed products made in the USDA-inspected plants. The same standards currently required for safety, wholesomeness and labeling accuracy would remain in force.

Processing ranges from simple operations that take USDA-inspected and approved meat or poultry and simply cut, bone or grind it, to complex operations that cook, cure, can or freeze meat or poultry to make hot dogs, beef stews, cold-cuts, heat-and-serve

whole chickens or packaged dinner entrees.

"The impetus for changes in the inspection system is the ever-increasing sophistication of the food industry with its high technology manufacturing practices that assure product safety and uniformity," said Crawford. "As technology improves, so, too, must inspection."

Crawford said the USDA proposal also contains changes in terminology and regulations needed to carry out the improved processing inspection system.

Patenting Of New Animals Is Topic Of Symposium

ITHACA, N.Y. — The legal, economic and social issues of animal patents will be discussed Dec. 5 and 6 when Cornell University convenes the first international symposium on the subject since the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office allowed patents on higher animals.

Representatives of government, industry, agriculture and universities will discuss issues ranging from the practical and economic considerations to the ethical problems behind the new legal protection for new animals.

"Many people around the world were shocked when, on April 3, 1987, the Board of Patent Appeals

and Interferences of the U.S. Patent Office declared higher animals patentable subject matter," said William H. Lesser, an associate professor of agricultural economics at Cornell and organizer of the symposium. The patentability of multicelled animals was widely anticipated after the 1980 patent on a novel bacterium, "but the decision came much sooner than many had expected," Lesser noted.

So far, only one animal patent -- for a genetically engineered mouse that is an animal model of human breast cancer -- has been granted in the United States, but at least 20 more patent applications

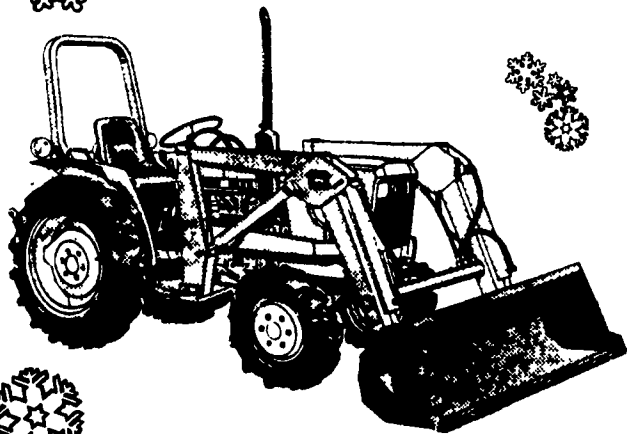
are believed to be in the works. Animal models duplicate the disease process and allow studies of causes and treatments without endangering human patients. The U.S. Congress has responded to the issue with a variety of legislation initiatives, including bills that would exempt farmers from royalty payments on patented animals, delay new animal patents for two years or ban them altogether.

"Potentially, patented animals are a multimillion-dollar business," Lesser said. "Among the possibilities are farm animals that are genetically engineered to be more disease resistant, faster growing and able to use feed more efficiently, while producing leaner

meat. A bit further along are changes in the configuration of animals -- bigger pigs, for example -- and increases in litter size, especially in cattle."

Seafood and poultry also are targets for genetic engineering that could lead to patents, Lesser said, but one of the most promising areas is animal models of human diseases. "The biggest search right now is for an animal model for human AIDS," he said, adding that the only laboratory animals now known to harbor human immunodeficiency virus -- certain non-human primates -- are too rare and expensive for widespread use.

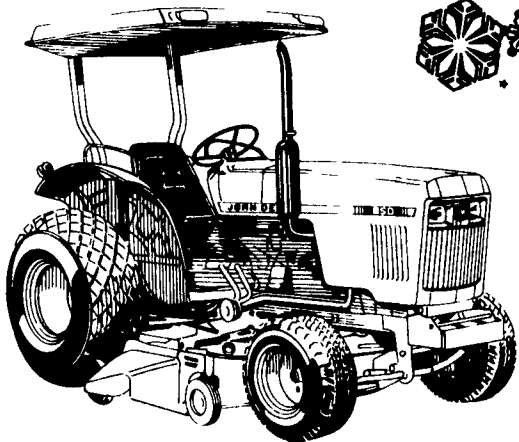
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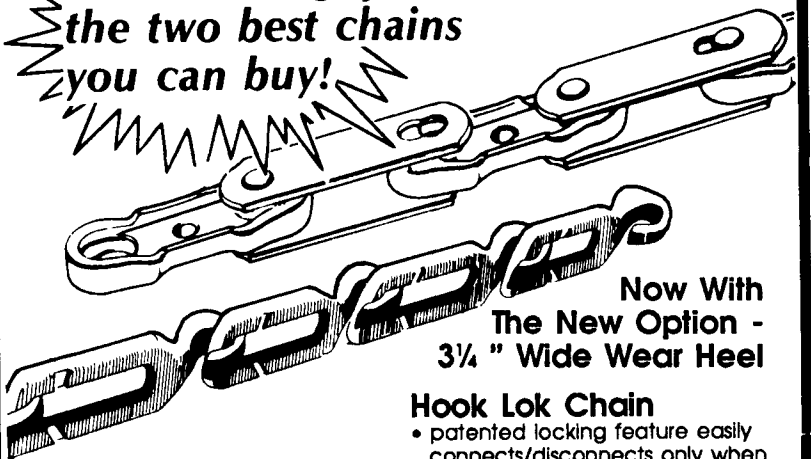
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