

SMA InfoMeat

February 13, 2006
Volume 25, Issue 7

Email: sma@tca.net
Internet website: www.southwestmeat.org

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FSIS Establishes Fee-for-Service Program for Horse Slaughter

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) today announced an interim final rule establishing a voluntary fee-for-service program under which establishments that slaughter horses can continue to receive ante-mortem inspection. To prevent adulterated meat and meat products from entering commerce, the Federal Meat Inspection Act (FMIA) requires that FSIS inspection program personnel conduct ante-mortem inspection of all livestock (cattle, sheep, swine, goats, horses, mules and other equines) before they are allowed to enter any slaughtering facility. The FMIA also requires that FSIS inspection program personnel conduct post-mortem examination and inspection of the carcasses and meat from those animals, as well as the establishments, to determine whether sanitary conditions are being maintained. The Humane Methods of Slaughter Act (HMSA) requires that humane methods be used for handling and slaughtering livestock and that the Secretary of Agriculture assign inspectors to examine these methods at facilities where livestock are slaughtered. The FY 2006 Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration and Related Agencies Appropriations Act included a section prohibiting the use of appropriated funds to pay the salaries or expenses of personnel to inspect horses (ante-mortem inspection) after March 10. Report language for the Act recognized FSIS's obligation under the law to inspect horses. While the appropriations bill prohibited appropriated funds from being used to pay for ante-mortem inspection, it does not eliminate FSIS' responsibility under the FMIA to carry out post-mortem inspection of carcasses and meat at official establishments that slaughter horses. In response to a petition, FSIS is establishing a fee-for-service program under which establishments can apply and pay for ante-mortem inspection of horses. The interim final rule will become effective March 10, 2006. Comments on the interim final rule must be received on or before March 9, 2006 and must be sent to Docket Clerk, #05-0361F, USDA, FSIS, 300 12th Street SW, Room 102 Cotton Annex, Washington, DC 20250 or emailed to: fsis.regulationscomments@fsis.usda.gov.

Bird Flu Hits EU

According to a Reuters News report, Italian poultry sales have plunged more than 50% after news that the deadly bird flu virus has reached Italy. In the past few days, Italy, Greece and Bulgaria reported their first cases of the virus that has now spread from Asia to Africa, killed approximately 90 people, and led to the destruction of millions of birds. With the discovery of the disease in Nigeria, Europe's governments had focused on the threat from returning migratory birds in the spring, but the new cases have added an extra urgency. Many governments may soon impose bans on keeping domestic poultry outside and implement plans to ramp up testing. Croatia and Bosnia banned imports of live birds and poultry products from Slovenia, Italy, Greece and Bulgaria. Croatia also stepped up border control of passengers and cars coming from the countries. Officials speculate that the bird flu scare could cost the EU's poultry industry billions. French poultry sales were still down some 15% due to reduction of its main markets in the Middle East, where demand had fallen due to bird flu, and industry officials in Greece said poultry sales had plunged 95% since Saturday. The arrival of bird flu in southern Italy has dominated the newspapers, eclipsing even the start of the campaign for the April general elections and the opening of the Winter Olympic Games in Turin. The United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) said control measures taken by the Rome government were "extremely effective", adding that there was no reason for Italians to avoid consumption of poultry. "It is important to underline that there is no evidence that the H5N1 virus is present in poultry in Italy. At the moment, the disease remains confined to individual cases in wild birds only," FAO's Juan Lubroth said in a statement. "The current situation in Italy does not provide consumers with any cause to avoid eating poultry products." FAO urged commercial poultry farms in the country to adhere to the sanitation standards set by the government, including confining poultry in order to avoid any potential contact with wild birds.

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FSIS Issues Draft IKE Scenario on Condensation

FSIS has issued a Draft Interactive Knowledge Exchange (IKE) 02D-06, "Condensation from Drip Pans - Verification of 9 CFR 416.2(d)." The objective of this IKE is to "provide inspection program personnel with a thought process for determining noncompliance when condensation occurs in an official establishment." This IKE discusses what inspection program personnel should do when a few small drops are observed on a drip pan which are not falling. This scenario leads an FSIS employee through a scheduled 06D01 procedure in the cut-up department of an establishment that produces tray packed poultry. The establishment has addressed previous issues of condensation by adding and maintaining fans and installing dehumidifiers. The establishment's SSOP requires all drip pans to be cleaned and sanitized nightly. The establishments also performs microbial testing to verify the effectiveness of the SSOPs. During operations, an employee monitors for condensation hourly and a QA person performs a direct observation of this employee twice daily. Inspection program personnel observe the water droplets and also observe an establishment employee inspecting the pans and removing condensation when present. Based on this, there is no 9 CFR 416.2(d) noncompliance as the inspector knows the establishment has provided adequate ventilation to control condensation "to the extent necessary to prevent the creation of insanitary conditions" and that adulteration of product is unlikely as the procedures described in the SSOP are being conducted. This IKE may be viewed at: www.fsis.usda.gov/FSIS_Employees/IKE_02D-06/index.asp. Comments on this IKE may be submitted, by February 17, to lke@fsis.usda.gov. FSIS will review comments received before issuing this IKE scenario in final form.

FSIS to Host Meeting on Reduction of Salmonella in Poultry

USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) today announced a public meeting February 23-24 in Atlanta, GA, to hear and discuss presentations on reducing the presence of *Salmonella* and other enteric microorganisms in poultry slaughter and processing. The meeting will be held at the Loudermilk Center, 40 Courtland Street, NE, Atlanta, GA, 30303, 404- 507-1696. An agenda will be available prior to the meeting on FSIS' Web site at www.fsis.usda.gov. Since 2002, FSIS has seen an increase in *Salmonella* positive samples in broilers. Although the overall percentage of positive samples in verification testing of broilers is still below national baseline prevalence figures, the upward trend in recent years is of concern to the agency. In August, FSIS held a public meeting to hear presentations on advances in pre-harvest reduction of *Salmonella* in poultry. The upcoming meeting in Atlanta will focus on interventions during broiler slaughter as well as further processing of ground chicken and turkey. FSIS will also announce and seek input on strategy to more effectively control *Salmonella* in all classes of poultry. The strategy will be patterned after the highly successful FSIS initiative to reduce the presence of *E. coli* O157:H7 in ground beef. The FSIS initiative, among other factors, has led to a 40 percent reduction in human illnesses associated with the pathogen. The U.S. is now below the Healthy People 2010 goal of 1.0 case per 100,000 persons, according to the Centers for Disease Control. In contrast, the CDC reported in its 2004 report on the incidence of infection with pathogens transmitted commonly through foods that overall, *Salmonella* illnesses fell by 8% compared to the 1996-98 baseline. The meeting will be available via net casting and a compact disc will be distributed following the meeting to ensure that all stakeholders have ready access to the presentations, questions and answers, and handouts for use as an educational and training tool. There will also be presentations on best practices, from the broiler, turkey and beef industries. FSIS believes that the significant process control measures taken by the beef industry for *E. coli* O157:H7 can serve as a very important road map for how the broiler industry can gain process control of *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter*.

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Briefly . . .

R-CALF Files Motion In Canadian Border Case: The Ranchers-Cattlemen Action Legal Fund (R-CALF) filed a motion last month in U.S. District Court in Montana, requesting a hearing and final ruling before U.S. District Judge Richard Cebull regarding the USDA's minimal risk rule regarding the Canadian border. In July, the U.S. 9th Circuit Court reversed an injunction against USDA, allowing live cattle under 30 months of age and beef from cattle under 30 months of age into the United States. R-CALF contends that when the 9th Circuit ruling opened the border, it did not "limit or eliminate the need for oral arguments of the case and a ruling by the District Court on the summary judgment motions filed by both R-CALF and USDA." According to R-CALF President Leo McDonnell, the court decision only affected the injunction, not "the merits of the entire case." SMA joined NMA and several other industry associations in filing an amicus brief January 27, supporting USDA's position and asking the court to deny R-CALF's motion.

FSIS Issues Directive on Ten-Day Letter for Inactive Operations: On February 7, FSIS issued Directive 5220.3 to provide district managers or the deputy of operations of the import inspection division (IID) with information on how to respond to an establishment that is not operating and has not responded to district office inquiries regarding its operational status and intentions. The directive titled, *Issuance of a Ten-Day Letter for Inactive Operations*, provides district managers and IIDs with procedures for communicating with inactive establishments and provides instructions for recording an establishment's activity status in the Performance- Based Inspection System. A copy of FSIS Directive 5220.3 is available on FSIS' website at www.fsis.usda.gov/OPPDE/rdad/FSISDirectives/5220-3.pdf.

Japanese Delegation Tours Processing Plants: Japanese inspectors toured several Kansas beef operations Friday, according to an Associated Press report. A delegation from Japan's ruling party, the Liberal Democratic Party, visited three facilities: the Creekstone Farms Premium Beef processing plant in Arkansas City, a cow-calf operation near Tonganoxie and Tyson Foods' processing facility in Emporia. The inspectors met with representatives of the USDA, as well as industry officials from Creekstone Farms, Tyson Foods and the American Meat Institute. "We are thoughtful and understand the concern of Japan, particularly the consumers, and want to say that U.S. beef is safe," said John Stewart, Creekstone's chief executive officer. The tour was part of an ongoing effort to demonstrate to Japan the safety measures taken by the U.S. beef industry.

NCBA Members Elect New Officers: The 2006 Cattle Industry Annual Convention concluded Saturday with the election of new officers by the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA). Almost 5000 cattlemen from across the nation attended the event. Mike John, manager of a retained ownership, commercial cow-calf operation in Huntsville, MO, was elected NCBA president and Waynesville, NC cattleman John Queen was elected president-elect. Paul Hitch, an Oklahoma cattle feeder and stocker, will serve as NCBA vice president.

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