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Sodium Labeling

Labeling the sodium content in foods is currently voluntary and many food manufacturers comply. However, some legislators contend stronger legislation is needed that would make mandatory labeling possible. Two sodium labeling bills have been introduced in Congress, and at least two others have been drafted.

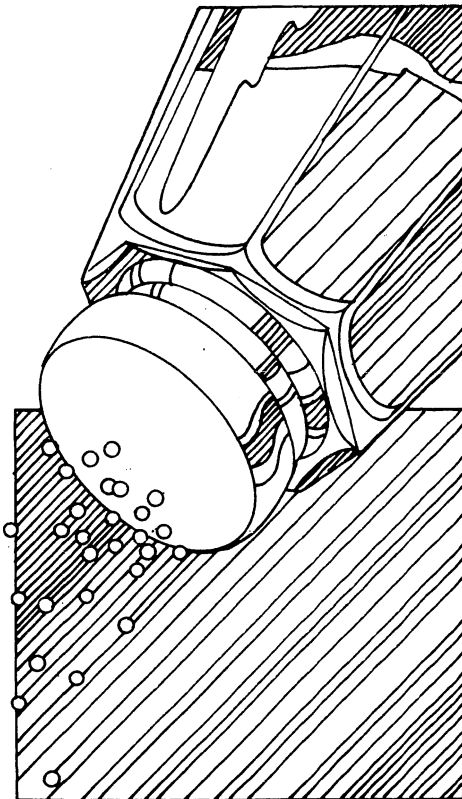
In June 1981, H.R. 4031, a bill that would require sodium and potassium labeling on most processed food products (but includes a small business exemption) was introduced. This bill proposed amendments to the Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act "to require that certain foods intended for human consumption be labeled to show the amounts of sodium and potassium they contain." Specifically, sodium and potassium levels in excess of 35 milligrams per serving in packaged foods would have to be listed on the label.

If such a labeling requirement is considered to be an unreasonable burden or to be impractical by the Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS), the manufacturer, packer, or processor may display the required sodium and potassium information "by a notice placed in close proximity to the place of display or sale of such food." The Secretary may also make exemptions from the labeling requirement for foods "produced by a manufacturer or processor whose annual volume of total sales is less than \$500,000."

H.R. 4031 would authorize the Secretary to enact the regulations needed to implement the bill's labeling requirements. Further, it specifies that such regulations be both cost effective and responsive to the needs of the public.

A second bill, H.R. 5160, was introduced in December 1981. It has received the support of the food industry and would make it unlikely that mandatory sodium labeling would ever come about unless the current voluntary programs are unsuccessful.

Specifically, this bill mandates a program by which the HHS Secretary would consult with and encourage food manufacturers and processors to voluntarily label the



amount of sodium in their products. HHS would also provide technical assistance to these manufacturers and processors to provide sodium labeling.

The legislation would require the Secretary to establish policies minimizing technical compliance problems resulting from labeling efforts. The Bill also requires reports to Congress as to the extent of industry cooperation, descriptions of the actions taken under the program, and recommendations of the Secretary for further action.

Finally, H.R. 5160 authorizes the Secretary to take further administrative action permitted by the Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act if these voluntary efforts are not judged adequate to inform the public.

Two alternative sodium labeling bills have been drafted but have not actually been introduced in Congress. As of this writing, consideration of any sodium labeling Bill has been postponed due, at least in part, to a lack of consensus by legislators.—
Kathleen Reidy (202) 447-7321 ■

Amendments to the Federal Inspection Acts

The Federal laws that regulate inspection of processed red meat, poultry, and egg products may be revised this year. If enacted, the legislation that was introduced in Congress this spring will permit a reduction in the frequency of inspection for some processed products.

The benefit will be the chance for better use of resources by the two USDA agencies that are responsible for administering the programs—Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) and Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS)—which could save about \$2 million and \$1.5 million, respectively, in fiscal year 1983. The major savings would result from a reduction in the number of Federal inspectors needed for the programs.

The bills, S. 2348 and H.R. 6062, both contain amendments to the Federal Meat Inspection Act, Poultry Products Inspection Act, and Egg Products Inspection Act. Only processed food products made wholly or in part from the carcasses of cattle, sheep, hogs, goats, and poultry would be affected. These products range from large sections of the carcass to retail cuts of steaks, chops, and chicken breasts, and more processed products such as sausage and frankfurters. The bills would not alter the continuous before and after slaughter inspection of these animals. Products that contain very small amounts of meat or poultry, or those that are not normally considered to be meat or poultry products by consumers, are not under USDA jurisdiction.

Meat and Poultry Products

Currently, under mandatory requirements, about 6,800 meat and poultry manufacturing plants are federally inspected daily. Typically, an inspector visits four or five plants per day to ensure sanitary and wholesome conditions, to check that products contain the amount of ingredients called for in their formulations, and to see that product labels listing net weight, ingredients, and so on are accurate.

The new bills would allow some manufacturing plants—those which already meet strict Government standards—to be inspected less than daily, perhaps once or twice per week at the discretion of the

Secretary of Agriculture. The Secretary would determine the manner and frequency of inspection for individual meat and poultry product processing plants based on:

- the nature and frequency of the plant's processing operations;
- the reliability of a plant's monitoring system;
- the plant's history of compliance with inspection requirements; and
- other factors the Secretary deems appropriate.

Labels of products manufactured in plants exempted from daily inspection would read "Prepared in a USDA inspected establishment."

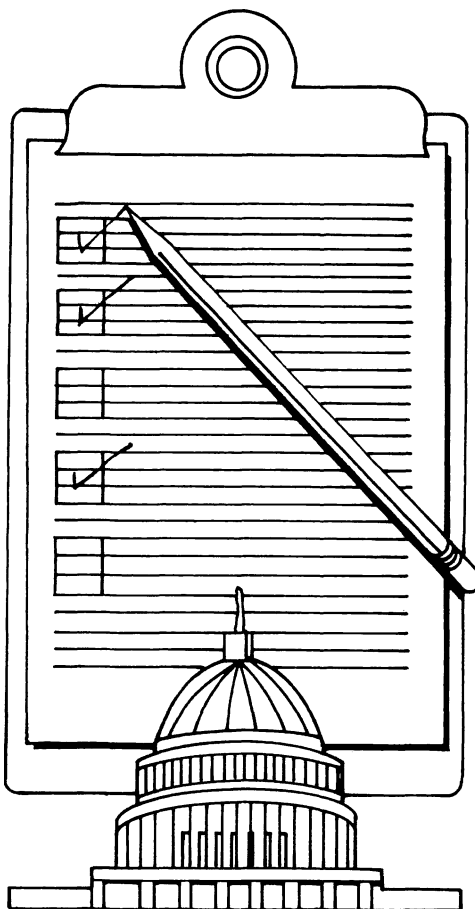
Plants that already have a federally approved total quality control program (currently there are 70) would be likely candidates for the initial phases of reduced Federal inspection. This voluntary program was developed by FSIS in 1980 and requires the plant to meet requirements at critical control points: temperature and time the meat and poultry are cooked, sanitation, and verification of moisture and fat content of the final product.

Plants wishing to participate must submit their total quality control system proposal to FSIS for approval. If approved, FSIS inspectors then periodically monitor and test product samples to ensure that Federal standards are being met.

Federal Savings and Exemptions

In the year following its introduction, the proposed legislation is expected to trim \$2 million from program costs of \$82.2 million for federal inspection of meat and poultry processing plants. The entire meat and poultry inspection costs for 1982, including slaughter inspection, are about \$308.2 million. FSIS estimates about \$26 million in savings by 1989. The legislation would allow USDA to reduce the number of inspectors by about 5.5 percent per year from the current number of 2,300 inspectors.

Once the program is in full operation, inspectors could be reassigned from processing plants to slaughtering operations where there is a greater need for agency resources. "This reshuffling would result in a more efficient use of inspectors, yet significant



dollar savings might not show up until the program is fully implemented," according to Wayne Batwin of the FSIS Office of Policy and Program Planning.

The meat and poultry inspection acts exempt a few specific categories of processors: farmers who process meat and poultry for their own consumption; butchers, retailers, and restaurants who custom slaughter or prepare products for direct sale to final consumers; meat processors with yearly sales of less than \$28,000; poultry processors who prepare their products according to recognized religious dietary laws; and processors who slaughter less than 20,000 poultry per year for small specialized markets. The bills would not effect the status of exempted processors.

The proposed legislation does not address State inspection programs per se, although the State programs must meet the same requirements as their Federal counterparts.

Last year, about 3.5 percent of manufactured meat and poultry products were in-

spected by State officials in 27 States with such programs. The amount is small because only federally inspected meat and poultry products can be shipped across State lines.

Shell Eggs and Egg Products

The Egg Products Inspection Act would also be amended under the proposed legislation. Inspectors would no longer have to continuously oversee blending, pasteurizing, drying, and labeling of liquid, frozen, and dried egg products. (Close to 1 billion pounds of these products were inspected last year.) The degree of inspection of these processing steps would be determined by the Secretary of Agriculture based on the four criteria listed in the amendments to the meat, poultry, and egg product inspection acts. Inspectors would, however, continuously inspect the breaking of eggs in the 115 official egg processing plants. Continuous inspection means that an inspector is in the plant during each processing shift while the plant breaks and blends eggs. The inspector ensures that every egg is broken individually and checked by a qualified plant employee to guarantee that wholesome eggs are used.

The bills would also reduce the number of inspections of shell egg packing operations. The 4,360 plants that pack eggs for consumer use are currently inspected once every quarter to ensure that cracked and dirty eggs are sent to USDA-inspected egg product plants and that leaking and contaminated eggs are rendered unusable as human food. The bills would only require one yearly inspection.

The Agricultural Marketing Service has estimated that the provisions of the bills would lower program costs from \$8.2 million to \$6.7 million. Approximately \$900,000 of the \$1.5 million savings would result from reducing inspections of egg packers from quarterly to once a year. The remainder of the savings would result from eliminating continuous inspection coverage of certain egg product processing operations such as pasteurizing, drying, and packing.—Rosanna L. Mentzer (202) 447-8487 ■