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USDA Actions

Food Safety and Quality

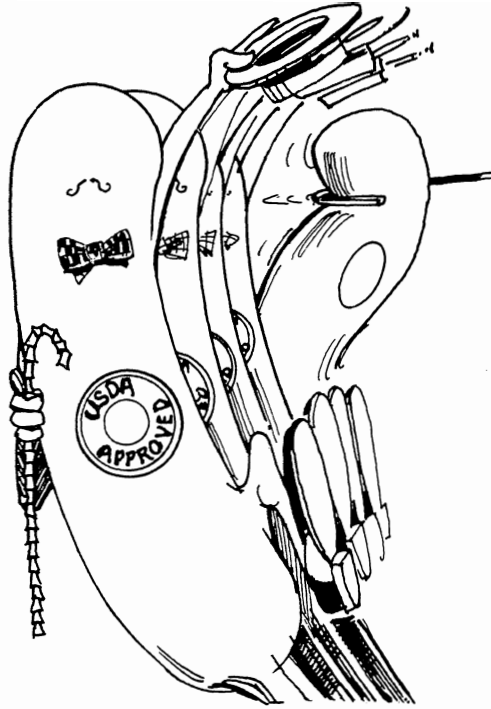
USDA ADOPTS NEW MEAT GRADING REGULATIONS

The USDA has issued new regulations to strengthen the Federal meat grading program and to provide for more uniform application of grade standards to cattle carcasses.

The new regulations went into effect last October. Under the new regulations, meat will generally be graded only as carcasses or sides and only at the plant in which the animals are slaughtered or initially chilled. Veal and calf will be graded only after the hide is removed and only in the plant where such removal occurs.

Changes in the regulations that apply to beef will:

- Specify that a beef carcass be ribbed at least 10 minutes before it is graded. This allows some of the grade-determining factors — especially marbling and color — time to become evident enough for accurate grading;
- Permit the yield grade mark to be removed from officially graded beef carcasses, sides, quarters and specified wholesale cuts or combinations of cuts if the layer of fat (natural or trimmed) is 3/4 inch or less. Removing these grade marks will permit low yield cuts to be accepted in the marketplace after fat cover has been removed.
- Clarify language in the present regulations which prevents trimming that alters the actual fat cover over the ribeye if a carcass is to be presented for grading. Certain practices designed to alter the fat cover are considered fraudulent and deceptive if the carcass is presented for grading.



PROCESSED MEAT AND POULTRY TO BE INSPECTED UNDER QUALITY CONTROL SYSTEM

Effective Sept. 15, meat and poultry processing plants may be inspected under a quality control system.

This change will modernize USDA's meat and poultry inspection.

Processing plants, which produce such items as frankfurters, frozen dinners, and soups containing meat and poultry, will have the option of changing to the new inspection system. It does not apply to the inspection of animals in slaughtering operations.

This new system will increase the efficiency of inspection while maintaining consumer protection. In no way will the authority and responsibility of the USDA inspector be reduced.

Under the new inspection program, firms operating quality control systems can voluntarily apply to USDA for approval of the system. Approval will be based on assurance that the system will produce products in compliance with the requirements of the inspection laws for wholesomeness and label accuracy.

USDA INCREASES PAY RATES FOR INSPECTION SERVICES

The overtime rate paid to the USDA's meat and poultry inspectors was increased \$1.32 cents per hour October of this year to keep up with the new Federal pay raise and rising program costs.

The overtime or holiday hourly rate for meat and poultry inspectors will increase

from \$15.44 to \$16.76. The base rate of \$13.48 will not change. The costs for laboratory services will increase from \$24.04 to \$26.24 an hour. All new rates are now effective.

Under the Federal Meat and Poultry Products Inspection Acts, USDA must assume all inspection costs, during routine Federal working hours, in all plants producing meat and poultry products for interstate or foreign commerce.

However, USDA charges producers a base rate for all voluntary inspection services — such as rabbit inspection — and for identification and certification services. USDA also charges States and other Government agencies for its laboratory services, and it charges the meat and poultry industry for all mandatory inspection services exceeding 40 hours per week or falling on Federal holidays.

USDA TO REVIEW REGULATIONS ON GRADING DAIRY PRODUCTS

USDA regulations on the inspection and grading of dairy products will be reviewed as part of an ongoing evaluation of all Federal regulations.

The review, required by a Presidential executive order, is intended to eliminate unnecessary Government regulations and ensure that all regulations are written simply and clearly.

The review is also designed to ensure rules are consistent with legislative goals and minimize any overlapping jurisdiction with other Federal agencies.

Among the regulations under review are those which USDA uses to approve dairy plant facilities for grading services and those under which USDA grades butter, cheese, and nonfat dry milk. This includes looking at regulations on grade standards — criteria such as flavor and appearance on which grade levels are based — to ensure they are understandable and concise.

Nutrition Education and Research

USDA ANNOUNCES CONTINUING STUDY ON NITRITE

Because of the continuing controversy surrounding the regulation of sodium nitrite in the food supply, USDA will undertake a study of the procedures used to evaluate research on toxic substances in foods.

USDA also contracted with the National Academy of Sciences to review existing data on nitrite and to recommend approaches for future research on nitrite and possible alternatives. Information on potential alternatives will be sought from both private industry and the Federal Government.

USDA has taken regulatory action to deal successfully with the problem of preformed nitrosamines in bacon, but the possibility still exists that nitrosamines can be formed through the combination of nitrites with amines and amides in the human digestive tract.

For this reason, the use of nitrite as an added substance in the food supply will continue to be a matter of significant concern to the agencies under existing law.

USDA is spending \$2 million in 1980 on nitrite alternative research and will spend the same amount in 1981.

\$1.5 MILLION AWARDED FOR PLANT BIOLOGY, HUMAN NUTRITION RESEARCH

Nineteen competitive research grants totaling \$1.5 million have been awarded to support basic research in plant biology and human nutrition research.

These are the last of the competitive research grant awards for fiscal year 1980.

A total of 200 projects received funding this year under the \$15.5 million program established by Congress to expand basic knowledge in plant science and human nutrition.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Science and Education Administration administers the grants.

Of the 19 grants awarded, 15 involve plant biology research and four involve human nutrition research.



Scientists will use the plant biology grants to learn how some plants are able to utilize nitrogen that is present in the atmosphere; how plants are able to capture the sun's energy and convert it into food; and how plant genes interact.

Eight of them will fund research into genetic mechanisms for crop improvement to encourage innovative approaches to developing genetically superior crops.

Six research projects on plant photosynthesis are being funded because there are many indications that productivity of crop plants may be improved by increasing their photosynthetic efficiency.

One research project focuses on understanding nitrogen fixing mechanisms in both symbiotic and free living organisms because nitrogen is the most common limiting nutrient to plant growth.

The objective of the human nutrition grants is to support basic research that will help fill gaps in knowledge about the body's nutrient requirements; how the body uses nutrients; and the nutritional quality of foods consumed in the United States.

Food Assistance

USDA STRENGTHENS WORK REQUIREMENT FOR FOOD STAMP RECIPIENTS

Able-bodied food stamp recipients must actively search for jobs or be dropped from the program, under regulations proposed by the U.S. Departments of Agriculture and Labor.

Under the proposed rules, people who fail to look for a job on their own or who don't report for the interviews at their State employment office will find their households dropped from the Food Stamp Program for two months.

Those who are exempt from the work registration requirement are primarily the elderly and disabled, those already working, those responsible for the care of dependents or those already registered for work under the unemployment insurance and work incentive programs.

The rules also require recipients who register for work to be called in to their State employment service, now identified as job service in many States, for an interview and job classification.

Under the existing program, funding limitations have prevented employment offices from actually calling in and interviewing any more than the most employable of the food stamp work registrants. Recipients who have registered for work but had few job skills have often not had the benefit of employment office services. Under the proposed rules, USDA would more than double the amount of funding to the U.S. Department of Labor, raising the annual amount to \$70 million so that the department can reach hard to place recipients.

State job service agencies would continue to refer registrants to potential employers, under the proposed rule. But food stamp job seekers would have to supplement this service with their own eight-week job search.

The proposed rules would establish as a standard that work registrants contact between eight to 24 potential employers within the eight week period, and also report for two follow-up interviews with their employment counselors. Requirements for

each person's job search would depend on their individual circumstances and the availability of jobs in the community, as assessed by the job service counselor.

The State job services would report to State welfare agencies the names of food stamp job seekers who refuse to comply with the interviews or job search requirements, as well as those who find jobs.

While the work registration and job search regulations are expected to be in effect by early 1981, the two Government agencies plan to run an 18 month demonstration project to test other ways, such as job-finding clubs, to match food stamp applicants with jobs. They will be seeking State welfare and job service agencies to sponsor the demonstration projects.

The proposed regulations complete implementation of major food stamp reforms enacted in 1977 and set uniform national standards for work registration and job search activities.

USDA BUYS CHICKEN PATTIES FOR SCHOOL LUNCHES

USDA has bought 504,000 pounds of frozen fried chicken patties for the school lunch program.

This purchase is intended to introduce a new, nutritious product into school lunches in selected States on a test basis. This marks the first time USDA has purchased this product. Chicken is plentiful and relatively inexpensive in the American marketplace.

USDA bought the chicken patties for \$1.26 to \$1.39 per pound — a total cost of \$676,000. This one-time purchase completes the test buy.

The Department will monitor how acceptable the chicken patties are to the students. If they're well received, USDA may buy more for nationwide distribution.

Offers were accepted from four of five firms submitting bids. The chicken patties will be shipped to schools between Nov. 17 to 29.



USDA PROPOSES INCENTIVES TO REDUCE FOOD STAMP ERRORS

States would be given financial incentives to reduce food stamp errors under a system of penalties and rewards recently proposed by the USDA.

The proposal would hold States liable for a portion of food stamps they issue in error, if the states' errors exceed a national average for all states. Penalties may be assessed for issuing food stamps to ineligible households and over or under paying eligible households.

At the same time, the proposed rule would reward States that keep food stamp errors to a minimum by increasing the Federal share of State administrative costs. Currently the Federal Government pays the full cost of food stamp benefits and half the costs States incur as administrators of the program.

The new rule would entitle States with error rates below the national average to receive 60 to 65 percent Federal matching funds for administrative expenses, depending upon how low their error rates are. States that reduce error rates by 25 percent even though they fail to go below the national average, would qualify for a 55 percent match for administrative costs.

Once implemented, the regulations could result in States being penalized as early as next summer. Rewards for low error rates would be paid before then according to a schedule established by Congress.

USDA TO BUY PLANTAINS FOR SCHOOL LUNCHES IN NEW YORK AND FLORIDA

More than 600,000 school children in New York, N.Y., and Ft. Lauderdale and Tampa, Fla., will take part this fall in a USDA pilot program that will offer a dessert made from Puerto Rican plantains — a banana-like tropical fruit.

At least 155,000 plantains will be combined with domestically-produced unsweetened orange juice to produce a food that will supply carbohydrates, potassium, and vitamin C to the children's diets.

USDA will buy the dessert for the school lunch program. This purchase will provide school children with a nutritious food while lessening a surplus of plantains in Puerto Rico. This meets another USDA goal of developing markets for surplus agricultural products.

USDA's plans to purchase plantains last year were postponed because of Hurricane David which destroyed the crop. Plantains are an annual crop, however. Puerto Rico produces about 400 million units — single fruits — each year and has a surplus of about 35 million units this year.

The purchase will provide 620,000 one-fourth cup servings of frozen ripe plantains with orange juice to be delivered to the school districts in early November. The plantain desserts will be distributed in schools with high numbers of Caribbean, Central and South Americans whose diet normally includes plantains.

However, hopeful that the product will be acceptable to all school children, USDA officials will monitor production and student acceptance of the dessert.

General Interest

USDA AND FDA REPROPOSE NET WEIGHT LABELING REGULATIONS

The USDA and the Food and Drug Administration of the Department of Health and Human Services are proposing to modify their net weight labeling regulations to precisely define just how much the weight of a packaged food may vary from the weight listed on the label.

The lack of precise Federal regulatory guidelines has made it difficult for State and local authorities to determine if net weight declarations are accurate at retail.

The USDA proposal defines net weight as the total weight of the package and contents minus the weight of the packaging materials. USDA has not determined whether to include liquid absorbed by the packaging in the net weight. Reasonable variations from stated net weight have been permitted since Congress used the phrase in a 1913 amendment which recognized the practical impossibility of packaging to exact weights. However, the current regulations do not define "reasonable variation."

The new proposal would replace the undefined standard with objective quantifiable standards. Compliance would be based on the weight of a specified number of samples taken from each production lot.

For example, if the total weight of 10 random-size containers from a lot of 250 containers equaled or exceeded the total of the labeled weights, the lot would be in compliance.

The proposal would allow single packages within the lot to be underweight because of recognized, unavoidable variations that occur during manufacture. However, the proposal sets a limit to the amount any single package could be underweight.

Besides defining "reasonable variations" for the food under its jurisdiction, FDA is proposing to allow for weight losses as a result of lost moisture in selected food for which there are data. Frozen fruits and vegetables packed in cartons could lose up to 1.0 percent of their weight due to moisture loss, soft ripened cheese would be allowed up to 3 percent and flour packaged in Kraft paper would be permitted up to 4 percent.



Food processors or associations may submit data justifying moisture losses for other food products to FDA.

The new proposal applies not only to consumer-size packages, but also to the containers of bulk products intended for further processing and packaging. The allowable variations for bulk packages are defined in the proposal.

USDA's Food Safety and Quality Service is responsible for accurate labeling of federally inspected meat and poultry products under the Federal Meat Inspection Act and the Poultry Products Inspection Act. The Food and Drug Administration is responsible for the labeling of all other foods under the Food Drug and Cosmetic Act.

USDA ALLOWS GUATEMALAN MEAT SHIPMENTS TO ENTER U.S.

USDA has again added Guatemala to the list of countries certified to ship meat products to the United States.

In February, March, and April of 1980, USDA removed three Guatemalan plants from its list of approved exporters after U.S. inspectors found shipments with excessive levels of pesticides at a port-of-entry.

Last July, inspectors of USDA's Food Safety and Quality Service found evidence that meat from one of the three

plants removed from the list may have been mixed with the shipments coming to the U.S. from two certified Guatemalan plants. The remaining two certified plants were then removed from the list of approved exporters pending investigations.

The Guatemalan Government cooperated fully with USDA during the investigations. Additionally, that country has taken a number of steps to correct administrative and technical deficiencies in their inspection program.

Guatemala has put beef export production under control of the Government's Import and Export Trade Directorate and has strengthened its residue inspection and control program. FSQS will now reapprove the two Guatemalan plants which were not involved with illegal shipments. standards. ■