

Beef recall triggers area schools to act

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After last week's largest-ever U.S. recall of beef, Easthampton schools are discarding 300 pounds of meat and completely revising the district's March school lunch menu, getting rid of meals such as beef tacos, shepherd's pie and hamburgers.

The school menus will be changed this week to ensure protection against food-borne disease, according to Gail McKeague, director of food services for Easthampton schools.

The meat considered at risk by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Safety and Inspection Services is from Pierre Foods, a company that receives products from the California-based Hallmark/Westland Meat Packing Company. Pierre Foods, based in Cincinnati, Ohio, distributes products to Easthampton and one product to Gateway schools. Both schools have withdrawn from serving these products in their lunch rooms.

In Easthampton, beef tacos will likely be replaced with chicken tacos, while hamburger patties will be replaced with chicken patties, according to McKeague. She said there will be more soups, chicken dishes and fruits and vegetables.

'The menu will change up a little bit,' McKeague said. 'We try and keep it healthy and we follow all the guidelines.'

Easthampton and other area schools placed an administrative hold on the recalled meat in response to a Feb. 11 letter from the Department of Education. That was followed up with an e-mail to superintendents last week and a mailing on the recall that went out Monday morning, according to Jonathon Considine, external relations coordinator for the DOE.

The recall was made after the Food and Safety Inspection Service of the United States Department of Agriculture investigated information they received from the Humane Society of the United States in January. The society sent the USDA agency video footage that revealed Hallmark/Westland Meat Packing Company workers using electric prods, forklifts and high-pressure hoses to force weak and sick cattle to stand for slaughtering. The company voluntarily recalled approximately 143 million pounds of raw and frozen beef.

'I am dismayed at the inhumane handling of cattle that has resulted in the violations of food safety regulations at the Hallmark/Westland Meat Packing Company,' Secretary of Agriculture Ed Schafer said in a statement Feb. 17. 'The prohibition of non-ambulatory cattle from the food supply is a safeguard against Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy,' which is commonly known as mad cow disease.

The recall is designated as Class II and defined as 'low health risk.'

'There wasn't any evidence that there were problems with the meat but because there were instances where animals were not receiving proper inspection there's a remote possibility of a food safety issue,' said Laura Reiser, of the Food and Safety Inspection Service at USDA.

The Hampshire Regional School District does not have any of the recalled meat now, but in the fall the food services director said the district received 300 hamburger patties from Oklahoma-based Advance Food Company, a company that receives products from Hallmark/Westland, according to Reiser. The meat was consumed in October, according to Linda Hampson, director of food services at Hampshire Regional.

Hampson and other districts were not notified of the recalled meat until Feb. 11.

'By that time I had no recalled meat in my system,' Hampson said. Meanwhile, meatball sandwiches were on Tuesday's menu in Amherst schools, but they've been replaced.

The Amherst schools probably have about 200 pounds of meatballs and 150 pounds of taco meat that have not yet been certified as safe, enough for about two schoolwide lunches, Rebecca Trietley, director of food services, said Monday.

The Amherst schools serve about 2,000 breakfasts and lunches a day and get about 1,500 of beef a year from the government. Trietley usually requests that some of that be diverted for further processing into taco meat or meatballs, for example.

The meatballs are made by Maid-Rite Steak Company, Inc., of Dunmore, Penn.; the taco meat is made by Landis Meat Company, of Quakertown, Penn.

Those are the products that have not yet been designated as safe, but meat supplied directly by the government already has been, Trietley said.

Trietley, who works for the international company Chartwells, said she is awaiting word on whether the processed beef is fine to serve or whether she should destroy it.

The two products have been on hold since Jan. 30.

'Chartwells is so on top of this,' Trietley said. She said she has been getting about a half dozen emails a day from Chartwells, state and federal agencies on the subject of the beef recall.

Meanwhile, it is business as usual in Northampton schools. The district has never had dealings with Westland Meat, according to Carol DiMauro, director of food services. DiMauro also said that the government, through its commodity program, has cut back on the products shipped to schools, with 'hardly any beef,' she said. As a result, DiMauro has been forced to buy beef locally, at market prices, from Wohrle's Foods in Pittsfield.

'We check meat temperatures every day,' she said, 'but we're also putting more chicken dishes on the menu, and a lot of pastas and sauce.'

DiMauro buys most of her poultry from Performance Food Group in Springfield and from Thurston Foods in Connecticut.

'You have recalls every so often. It's nothing new. It goes with the territory,' said DiMauro. 'But if those cows were, in fact, sick, they never should have used them. The first signs of mad cow disease are cattle lying down.'

Heather Bouley, food services coordinator at Smith Vocational and Agricultural High School, said that her department works in collaboration with the Northampton district in the purchasing of food.

'I'm convinced our meat is safe,' said Bouley, and referred to a memorandum sent by the state's Department of Education on Feb. 11, which indicates that, according to USDA records, public schools in Massachusetts have not received any beef from Westland Meat Company. The DOE continues to distribute A608 Beef 40 and A626 Beef Patties from its warehouses, according to the memorandum, sent by Martha Herlihy, Section Head for Food Distribution.