

Class II Recall from Not So Classy Meat Company

By ACSH Staff — February 20, 2008

Some parents may be sending their children to school with brown bag lunches this week, and who could blame them? The Westland/Hallmark Meat Co. based in California recently issued a recall of 143 million pounds for all of its raw and frozen beef products since Feb 1, 2006. It is the largest-ever meat recall in the U.S., the previous record being set in 1999 when another company -- Thorn Apple Valley -- recalled 35 million pounds of ground beef. According to [an article](#) ^[1] in the *New York Times*, officials from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) estimate that about 37 million pounds of the recalled beef went to school programs, and they believe most of the meat has probably already been eaten.

Although some of the hamburger being recalled has already been served to students, no illnesses have been reported, according to the USDA. The Department also stated that there was little health risk because the animals had already passed pre-slaughter inspection. Thus, the recall is classified as Class II, indicating the chances of health hazards are remote. Class I recalls -- for example, those caused by E.coli contamination -- indicate that eating the product may cause serious health problems or even death.

Why the massive recall, then, if there is little or no risk of illness? The short answer is that the Westland/Hallmark plant procedures violated USDA regulations, and animals were being slaughtered in an unapproved manner. The issue was brought to light when the Humane Society decided to randomly investigate the practices at the California meat company and secretly captured inhumane treatment of cows on video. The meat plant workers were taped forcing sick or injured cows into slaughter by kicking them or ramming them with forklifts. The Department of Agriculture guidelines mandate that an inspector review sick or injured animals -- "downer" cattle -- before they are slaughtered. Federal regulations call for keeping downer cattle out of the food system because they pose a higher risk of contamination from E.coli, salmonella, or mad-cow disease, since they typically wallow in their feces, and their immune systems are weak. Also, there are strict rules for the treatment of animals under the Humane Slaughter Act, including details on how animals should be treated before death.

This is another sad revelation about our food system, and it demonstrates the many shortcomings of the dysfunctional inspection system. How were the animals being mistreated and abused right under the USDA's nose? How did they end up in the food supply, and why weren't federal veterinarians being alerted when cows became unable to walk after passing inspection, as required? No charges have been filed against the company yet, but an investigation by federal authorities continues. According to the *New York Times* article, a USDA spokesman said there is no shortage of inspectors. This is contrary to what the Food and Water Watch group argues, saying that the USDA has left up to 21% of inspector positions vacant in some areas.

The sole comfort from this whole scandal is that at least there is no apparent health risk from consuming the meat this company produced. However, the conscience of this meat company's owners should be troubled by the inhumane treatment of its animals. And if there really is an adequate number of inspectors with the capacity for proper monitoring, the inspectors have failed those animals by keeping silent, letting the public down once again.

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[1] <http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/business/AP-Slaughterhouse-Abuse.html?>

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