

Hard to stomach

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

The video is hard to watch, but it's what it could mean for public food safety and the health of our citizens that is really hard to stomach.

On Sunday, the U.S. Department of Agriculture announced the largest beef recall in its history - 143 million pounds of ground beef from a slaughterhouse in Chino, Calif. The agency took this action in response to a disturbing undercover video distributed by the Humane Society of the United States that shows workers at the meat plant kicking what appear to be sick cows and using cattle prods and forklifts to get them moving.

That sort of treatment is clearly inhumane, but - in this case - it could also be dangerous and criminal. Cows that can't walk are assumed to be ill and some may be afflicted with mad cow disease. That's why the federal government has banned these poor animals from the food supply. And it's why the Hallmark/Westland Meat Packing Co. - where meat production has been suspended since Feb. 4 - may soon be getting a visit from authorities. As well it should. The company won't answer questions from reporters, and the prepared statements it released are far-fetched and insufficient. For instance, Steve Mendell, president of the company, insists it has always followed federal regulations. The video says otherwise.

The good news is that the federal government, along with state and local officials, deserve applause for moving quickly in issuing the beef recall and helping pull the product off shelves. Federal officials say the risk to consumers is minimal, and the recall seems to be merely a precaution. Still, that sort of swift and decisive reaction gives one confidence that our system of safety checks is working as it should.

The bad news is that, according to the USDA, the majority of the recalled beef has probably been consumed already. This includes 37 million pounds of meat that went mostly to schools. About 150 school districts across the country stopped using beef from the Hallmark Meat Packing Co., which is associated with Westland. Several local districts - including San Diego Unified, South Bay Union, Chula Vista Elementary, Vista Unified and Oceanside Unified - have stopped serving beef.

At this point, we can only hope for the best, and take authorities at their word that the risk to the public from this incident is minimal. But, in the future, more needs to be done to force compliance with food safety laws. We need more investigators, more inspections and harsher penalties for companies that break the rules and, in the process, put the public's health in jeopardy.

As much as we're doing in this regard to protect our food supply, it obviously isn't enough.

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