



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: JUNE 2, 2008

CONTACT:

TONY CORBO (202) 683-2449
CHRIS WALDROP (202) 797-8551
NANCY DONLEY (773) 419-0128

Consumer Groups Angered by FDA and USDA Inaction on CO-treated Meat

Letters Urge HHS and USDA Secretaries to Stop Deception

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Declaring the government’s two-and-a-half year delay as “inexcusable”, six of the nation’s leading consumer groups urged the Food and Drug Administration and the Department of Agriculture to immediately ban the deceptive and potentially unsafe use of carbon monoxide (CO) in case-ready meat packaging pending a thorough legal and scientific review. No formal review, which is required by law for food additives and substances that impart color to food’s appearance, has ever been conducted on meat packaged with carbon monoxide.

The six groups – Food and Water Watch, the Consumer Federation of America, Safe Tables Our Priority, Consumers Union, National Consumers League and the Government Accountability Project – sent letters to Secretary of Health and Human Services Mike Leavitt and Secretary of Agriculture Ed Schafer urging their departments’ agencies to act to address the use of CO in meat packaging once and for all. The letters urged the secretaries to not wait for Congress or a new Administration to do what should have already been done by the agencies that report to them, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS).

Carbon monoxide is used in meat packaging to color meat so it stays red indefinitely in the package and looks fresher than it actually is. “This is such obvious deception,” said Wenonah Hauter, Executive Director of Food and Water Watch. “It is quite remarkable that our government has allowed this blatant attempt to fool consumers to go on and on.”

Since a citizens' petition calling for a ban on meat packaged with CO was filed with the FDA on Nov. 15, 2006, neither agency has taken any action in the matter. The groups decried the inaction by the FDA and FSIS, the federal agencies responsible for protecting the food supply. The federal agencies have refused to act despite:

- Bans in other countries;
- Overwhelming evidence demonstrating the deceptive and potentially dangerous qualities of meat packaged with CO;
- The fact that major retail chains across the country have acknowledged the deception and removed the product from their shelves;
- Entreaties from consumer groups and Members of Congress;
- Numerous investigative reports by news media throughout the country; and,
- A national survey indicating overwhelming consumer opposition to coloring meat with carbon monoxide.

“FDA and FSIS have been remiss in their duties to protect consumers,” said Chris Waldrop, Director of the Food Policy Institute of the Consumer Federation of America. “Adding carbon monoxide to fresh meat packaging turns the meat bright red indefinitely. This is clearly deceptive because it makes the meat look fresher than it may actually be and that is against the law.”

The groups were seriously disappointed by the failure of the agencies to remove the meat from the market in the face of overwhelming evidence that coloring meat with CO is deceptive and potentially harmful; that the practice is against existing law; that meat has been shown to spoil well within the use-by dates; and, that the meat companies played fast and loose with the science and the facts in order to sneak this process in under the radar.

Given that there is no benefit to consumers and that the only perceivable attribute of adding carbon monoxide to meat is to increase meat company profits at the expense of consumer safety, the groups are asking Secretaries Leavitt and Schafer to take immediate action and institute a ban to protect consumers pending the kind of review that fresh meat products require.

#

Attachment: Text of the letter