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Boston's public schools shelve 'pink slime'

Hamburgers, meatballs are off lunch menus until questions are answered

By **Akilah Johnson and Matt Rocheleau** | GLOBE STAFF AND GLOBE CORRESPONDENT MARCH 16, 2012

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KAYANNA SZYMCZAK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

On Wednesday, Michael Peck, director of food and nutrition services at the Boston School Department, ordered all USDA ground beef products that were treated with ammonia to be recalled from Boston schools.

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Hamburgers, taco meat, meatballs, and Salisbury steak - all products made with ground beef - have been temporarily stricken from lunch menus in Boston's public schools as the district awaits word from the federal government about the presence of "pink slime."

That is the name critics have slapped on the ammonia-treated ground beef filler that the US Department of Agriculture dubs "lean, finely textured beef."

As Boston school authorities demanded answers about the ground beef in their freezers, the USDA announced Thursday that it will give districts nationwide the chance to opt out of purchasing meat containing the filler.

BANNED IN BOSTON

Among other foods prohibited from being served in the Boston public schools are fried foods, sodas, and sugary confections.



It has been used in the National School Lunch Program for years, but drew widespread objection last week when word of its use hit the Internet and went viral.

"It's yet another form of the adulteration of food products in our food supply," said Michael Peck, the new director of food and nutrition services at Boston's schools. "I am sure that it is considered generally safe, but I think we need to hold the USDA to a higher standard than 'generally safe' when, in fact, this product has been eliminated from many retail segments . . . because they felt it didn't meet a high enough standard."

The district quarantined about 62,000 pounds of beef worth \$200,000 Wednesday, marking it "do not use." And it will stay that way until the school district has answers. If the meat contains the product, it will be discarded; if it does not, it will return to the cafeteria.

But Peck cautioned that the district might never know, because the federal government, he said, "does not require labeling of beef that has been treated with this product." A third option would be to buy beef from a purveyor other than the federal government.

The low-cost filler is made from fatty scraps of beef left over from cuts typically thrown away. The meat and fat are separated by extreme heat, pushed through a tub, and treated with ammonia hydroxide, a chemical used to decontaminate food and kill bacteria.

Joan Salge Blake, a registered dietitian and clinical associate professor at Boston University's Sargent College of Health & Rehabilitation Sciences, likens the process to a high-tech way of trimming as much fat as possible from a steak. "It's meat," she said, "and it's up to you if you want to eat it. Sort of like you buy organic, or you don't buy organic."

Next year, the USDA will give school districts nationwide the choice to choose between beef patties, meatballs, and gyro strips made with or without the products "in response to requests from school districts

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across the nation.”

“USDA only purchases products for the school lunch program that are safe, nutritious, and affordable, including all products containing lean finely textured beef,” the department said in a statement released Thursday.

“However, due to customer demand, the department will be adjusting its procurement specifications.”

Dubbed “pink slime” by a federal microbiologist, the meat product has been on the market for years.

While federal regulators insist that the processed meat is safe to eat, advocates of organic agriculture disagree, saying that it is an unappetizing example of industrialized food production.

But Katherine Tucker, chairwoman of Northeastern University’s department of health sciences, said the issue is not necessarily one of safety but of consumer confidence.

There is no precise way to determine pink slime’s prevalence in the market, industry officials said, because the meat filler does not have to be labeled as an ingredient in ground beef.

Consumers are not aware that their hamburger might not be made solely of ground beef but filled with “something that’s been forcibly separated,” Tucker said.

“I study food, and it’s new to me,” Tucker said. “The treatment of it is just really unattractive. And the idea that it’s in our school lunches and has been fed to children without our knowledge is upsetting to a lot of people.”

Parent Nikkisha Thompson-Speivey said she was comforted by the school district’s move to take the product out of school lunches.

“The whole ammonia thing was unsettling,” said Thompson-Speivey, whose two children attend Orchard Gardens K-8 School in Roxbury. “When I heard about it, I was like, ‘Are you kidding me?’ And it makes me wonder what’s in the other foods.”

She expects her youngest to be particularly upset that lunches bereft of ground beef, such as tacos and meatballs, will be served until substitute supplies arrive. “But she’ll get over it,” the Roxbury mother said.

The school’s cafeteria manager thinks the outcry is overblown. “If this food was bad, the whole school would be sick,” said Kathy Carney from inside the walk-in freezer.

“Do not eat” was written in red marker on four boxes and a few bags, the school’s supply of products containing ground beef.

But there was nothing pink, slimy, or noticeably unusual about the contents inside. It looked like standard frozen beef.

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