

Expert: 'Pink slime' may be unappetizing, but it's safe, genuine beef

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This material, known as lean, finely textured beef or 'pink slime,' has ignited a huge meat controversy.

Whether you call it "pink slime" or lean, finely textured beef, you can call it a much-maligned product at the heart of an emotional controversy fueled by misinformation, according to a meat expert in Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences.

The stuff made headlines recently when it was reported that the federal government plans to buy ground beef that contains the product, also known as LFTB, in the coming year for use in the national school lunch program's beef products. After a newspaper broke the story, a national furor erupted, and "[pink slime](#)" became the most searched topic on the Internet.

But the debate has been overhyped by the news media and distorted in social media, contends Edward Mills, associate professor of dairy and [animal science](#). "It is unfortunate that it has been dubbed pink slime, even though it may be an unattractive material," said Mills, who teaches food science courses on the science and technology of meat, poultry and seafood, including factors affecting the palatability and wholesomeness of meat.

"But 'lean, finely textured beef' just doesn't roll off the tongue the way 'pink slime' does. Folks can make up their own minds about this, but there is so much misinformation out there now that it makes it difficult for most people to know what to believe."

The material in question is lean meat that remains on fat trimmings removed from beef carcasses and that cannot be reclaimed with a knife cost effectively, explained Mills, who holds both master's and doctoral degrees in meat science. This remaining meat is separated from fat in a mechanical process that involves heating minced trimmings only to about body temperature (100 degrees) then centrifuging to separate lean from fat.

"So there was a significant amount of lean going to waste that now is recovered," he said. "The regulatory wing of USDA says that this product fits in the same category as boneless lean meat. It is the consistency of [baby food](#) and most often used along with conventional boneless beef to make ground beef."

Because the trimmings may harbor dangerous pathogens that can cause foodborne illness, they are decontaminated with either ammonia gas or citric acid, Mills noted. He strongly disputes claims that lean, finely textured beef is unsafe.

"This issue really has been elevated in social media," he said. "Claims

made that this product is not safe are blatantly untrue. From a microbial-pathogen point of view, the product has a better reputation than straight ground beef.

"If you took LFTB out of the ground beef mix, you certainly wouldn't improve the microbial status, and you would not reduce the occurrence of E. coli 0157:H7 or salmonella in ground beef. In fact, it would be just the opposite. There is not a safety issue here."

The brief exposure of LFTB to ammonia gas is a very effective antimicrobial treatment, Mills said. And whether it is applied to the meat in this finely textured form or whether it is applied to the side of the beef carcass -- which is another place that USDA accepts its use as an effective intervention for reducing microbial and pathogen numbers -- it makes meat safer.

So despite what you may have heard or read, safety is not an issue with lean, finely textured beef, Mills stressed. But he stopped short of promoting it.

"If you are offended by something that is sticky and gooey and red, and in addition you know that it came from meat, you might find it disgusting," he said. "Somehow that combination of things is offensive to some folks.

"We live in a culture where emotions consistently trump logic and reason, and this is one of those. The only sound condemnation of the product is that it just looks bad. But the fact remains -- it is a low-cost source of very lean ground beef."

Actually, added to traditional ground beef in small amounts -- perhaps just 10 percent or 15 percent, according to Mills -- some people believe it enhances the product texture.

"If you make ground beef only from this material, it wouldn't have a typical coarse granular texture that you expect from ground beef," he explained. "But formulating ground beef with a small amount of LFTB improves the texture. Many consumers appreciate finer [ground beef](#) and find the smoother texture to be a desirable characteristic.

"But it is true, LFTB is detectable and it changes the character of the patty. Now, whether that is good or bad is in the eyes of the beholder and is greatly influenced by the way it is presented."

Some important players in the meat business decided recently how they see it, or perhaps more accurately, how their customers see it. McDonald's, Taco Bell and Burger King all announced in January that they no longer would use the material in their ground meat. Mills conceded that he understands their decision, but regrets it.

"They succumbed to the pressure, and they are out there on the line -- right at the consumer interface," he said. "And when the popular consensus is that a product is bad, then businesses on the interface with consumers don't have any choice but to respond to their desires and beliefs. Consumers are always right."

But Mills believes not using LFTB is a decision to waste food, and he hates that because it happens too much in the U.S. "I have seen enough situations in other countries where people appreciate food," he said. "We don't in the United States because we have so much that wasting food is part of our culture -- it is the thing that we do.

"We eat ourselves sick and throw the rest away. But that is not the rule around the world for most of the population, and it bothers me when we make a decision like this to waste food. I grew up in a household where we did not waste food."

One controversial aspect of LFTB yet to be decided is whether it will be labeled differently than other beef, as some detractors insist. They contend that without special labeling, consumers can't tell when they are getting pink slime. Mills doesn't expect special labeling will be required.

There is no technical justification for labeling, he said. LFTB is meat that has been warmed to body temperature and physically separated from fat. It is uncooked beef.

"I don't think that USDA will require this product -- whether you call it pink slime or lean, finely textured beef -- to be labeled specially," Mills said. "I expect the officials at USDA will resist efforts to require labeling."

But he said their response may come down to the political will of the organization. "Will they stick to their guns?" he wondered. "If not, we could see special labeling for this. But if so, I worry that it is going to set a precedent that will change considerably how we label a variety of other meat products."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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