

Some schools planning to drop 'pink slime' meat

March 16 2012, By KATHY MATHESON , Associated Press



A hamburger is made from ground beef containing what is derisively referred to as "pink slime," or what the meat industry calls "lean, finely textured beef," Thursday, March 15, 2012 in Concord, N.H. Under a change announced Thursday by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, districts that get food through the government's school lunch program will be allowed to say no to ground beef containing the ammonia-treated filler and choose filler-free meat instead. The low-cost filler is made from fatty meat scraps that are heated to remove most of the fat, then treated with ammonium hydroxide gas to kill bacteria such as E. coli and salmonella. (AP Photo/Jim Cole)

(AP) -- The lunch lady won't be serving up "pink slime" anymore at several school districts around the country.

Under a change announced Thursday by the U.S. [Department of Agriculture](#), districts that get food through the government's [school](#)

lunch program will be allowed to say no to ground beef containing an ammonia-treated filler derisively called "pink slime" and choose filler-free meat instead.

Several school systems said they will change their cafeteria menus when the move takes effect next fall. What's not yet clear is how much the switch might cost and whether it could lead to price increases for [school lunches](#).

"Our district has long advocated for purity and disclosure in food products. And we will definitely be moving to the pure ground beef when that becomes available in the fall," said John Schuster, spokesman for Florida's Miami-Dade school system, the nation's fourth-largest district with 345,000 students.

He could not immediately speak to the cost, noting that the district is on spring break. An Agriculture Department spokeswoman did not return a call for comment.

The change came after a furious online campaign to rid school cafeterias of what the meat industry calls "lean, finely textured beef." The low-cost filler is made from fatty meat scraps that are heated to remove most of the fat, then treated with ammonium hydroxide gas to kill bacteria such as E. coli and salmonella.

It has been on the market for years, and federal officials say it is safe. The National Meat Association has also noted that ammonium hydroxide is used in baked goods, puddings and other processed foods

But the USDA announced that, in response to requests from school districts nationwide, it will offer schools a choice: 95 percent lean beef patties made with the filler, or less lean bulk ground beef without it.

The Philadelphia school district serves one product with the additive - a beef patty - in its high schools only, according to spokesman Fernando Gallard. He said he was unaware of any complaints.

"We have full confidence in the products that are given to us by the USDA," Gallard said. But given the choice next year, he said the 146,000-student district will consider the alternatives.

In New York City's 1.1 million-student school system, officials said they are working with food vendors to phase out pink slime products. They said they have heard concerns from parents and food advocates.

The Agriculture Department sets national nutritional standards for school meals, but districts make the decisions on what food to serve to meet the guidelines. On average, districts in the National School Lunch Program buy about 20 percent of their food through USDA, with the remainder coming directly from private vendors.

There are no precise numbers on how prevalent the filler product is, but one industry official estimates it is in at least half of the ground meat and burgers in the U.S.

Tony Geraci, executive director of child nutrition for the schools in Memphis, Tenn., said the 110,000-student district hasn't used the product at least since he arrived in October. Geraci said that while he understands the food industry doesn't want to waste any part of an animal, pink slime is "a horrible product" not fit for human consumption.

"Any time you buy something that is chunked, chopped or formed, you run the risk of problems with product integrity," Geraci said. "We buy whole-muscle stuff. We buy whole pork shoulders. We buy whole turkeys."

The USDA this year is contracted to buy 111.5 million pounds of [ground beef](#) for the National School Lunch Program. About 7 million pounds of that is from Beef Products Inc., which has gone on the offensive to dispel what it says are misconceptions about the product. ("Myth 4: Boneless lean beef trimmings are produced from inedible meat").

Sen. Robert Menendez, D-N.J., said in a statement that the [Agriculture Department](#) should go a step further by requiring the additive to be listed as an ingredient on beef sold in supermarkets. But he praised the agency for the new options being given to schools.

"All it takes is a look at a picture of pink slime to understand parents' concerns that this product doesn't belong in our school lunchrooms - especially as we are encouraging kids to eat more fruits and vegetables," Menendez said.

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