

Hold the radiation, schools say

Irradiated meat is too expensive, Nebraska and Iowa districts say

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By Michaela Saunders

Most Nebraska and Iowa school districts are saying no, thank you, to irradiated ground beef in their school lunches.

In Nebraska, no district has committed to serving irradiated beef next school year.

In Iowa, the response has been mixed, said Dean Flaws, commodity distribution consultant for the Iowa Department of Education.

One school official said she was not convinced that the irradiation technology was safe, but most said it was simply a matter of cost. Irradiated beef would cost school districts from 13 to 20 cents more per pound, federal officials estimate.

School officials say food preparers already take the necessary precautions to make sure beef is safe.

"Why increase the cost when we don't have a problem?" said Amy Friedman, spokeswoman for the Millard Public Schools, which has chosen not to serve irradiated beef next school year.

Tammy Yarmon, director of nutrition services for the Omaha Public Schools, recommended to the school board this week that the district not buy irradiated ground beef.

She said the process - which exposes the meat to gamma rays or electron beams - does kill such food-borne illnesses as salmonella, listeria and E. coli O157:H7, but it doesn't kill everything.

"Our staff is so careful with the products we serve our kids," Yarmon said.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture approved irradiation as safe for meat and poultry in 1999.

In January, irradiated ground beef was offered to participants in the National School Lunch Program, which reimburses school districts for serving healthy meals to children. For the remainder of this school year, neither Nebraska nor Iowa chose to serve irradiated meat.

The USDA is letting individual districts decide whether to serve it and has provided education materials on the pros and cons.

Nebraska's food distribution program buys food for districts from the USDA and other suppliers and delivers it to 456 school kitchens across the state.

Julia West, Nebraska's food distribution coordinator, said she needs to know what districts plan to serve next fall by the end of April, so orders can be placed.

"Next year we will be offering both irradiated and nonirradiated ground beef," West said.

Flaws, of the Iowa Department of Education, said he needs to know districts' plans by April or May so that he can place orders for the 580 Iowa schools served by the office.

The higher cost for irradiated beef was a major concern for districts of all sizes, given the amount of beef they serve.

This month alone, the Aurora Public Schools had served 684 pounds as of Thursday.

The Omaha Public Schools cooks up 80,000 pounds of ground beef each year. Lincoln schools feed students 32,000 pounds per year.

"We don't see a need to use it," said Edith Zumwalt, director of nutrition services for the Lincoln Public Schools. "We handle our beef in such a manner we don't have to worry about E. coli."

Diane Zipay, director of nutrition services for the Westside Community Schools, said the district serves mostly precooked meat products.

She said she is leaning against using irradiated ground beef next school year.

"For a restaurant, with a lot of untrained staff, it does have a place," Zipay said. "But in a school, it's like dipping children in alcohol before they go to class. It's just not necessary."

Though cost is the primary concern, at least one school district questioned the safety of the irradiation technology.

"They might tell us all of this now, but what are they going to tell us in six months about the safety of it?" asked Vickey Jensen, director of food service for the Aurora Public Schools. The district has not yet made its decision.

Spencer Stevens, who helped develop the electron beam technology used to irradiate meat, said food safety precautions such as regularly washing hands and thoroughly cooking beef do protect students. But irradiated meat offers an extra safeguard, he said.

"The real winners are the kids," said the former vice president of SureBeam Corp., an irradiation company that is in bankruptcy and had operated a plant in Sioux City, Iowa.

"Kids and the elderly are the ones who get sick" from food-borne contaminants, he said.

Stevens compared consumer wariness of irradiated beef to the reaction when milk pasteurization was first developed. Irradiated meat could have similar benefits as well, he said.

"It will do for the public what pasteurizing milk did for the public," he said. "And that's a big statement."