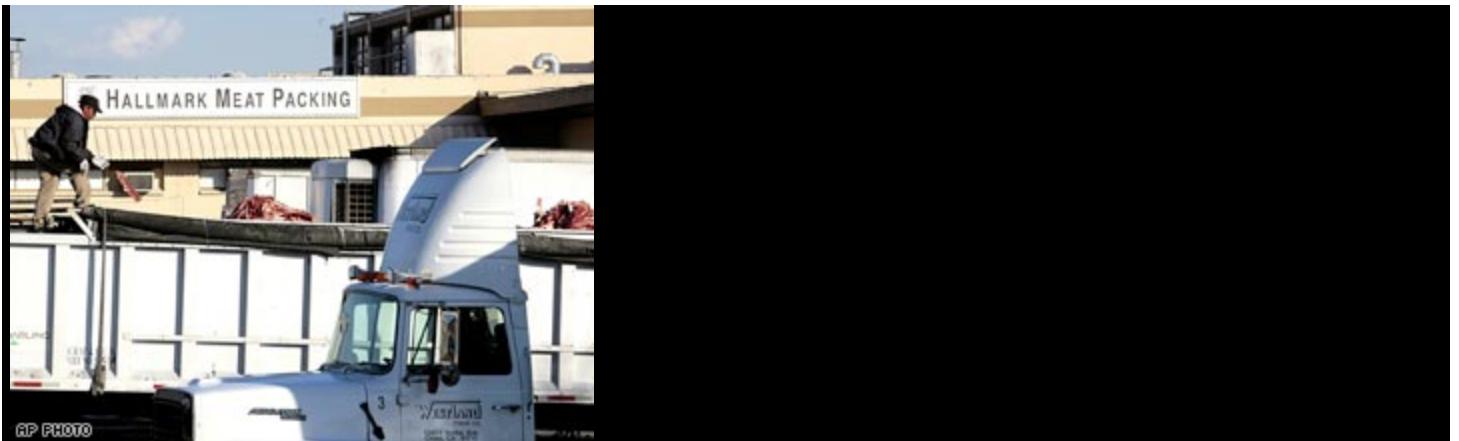


USDA: Most recalled beef has probably been eaten

- **STORY HIGHLIGHTS**

- Officials trying to determine where 143 million pounds of recalled beef wound up
- About 37 million pounds of the meat went to school lunch programs
- USDA official: There is "remote probability" beef could cause illness in humans
- Westland/Hallmark Meat Packing Company employees accused of cattle abuse

(CNN) -- Federal officials are trying to track down the 143 million pounds of beef recalled Sunday, but they say that most of it has probably been eaten.



Cattle carcass scraps are dropped into a truck at the Westland/Hallmark slaughterhouse last month.



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Keith Williams, a U.S. Department of Agriculture spokesman, said investigators have found no cases of illness related to the recalled meat.

The beef recall came after inspectors said they found "clear violations" of USDA regulations at a California slaughterhouse that has been accused of mistreating cows.

"We do not know how much of this product is out there at this time. We do not feel this product presents a health risk of any significance," said Dick Raymond, the undersecretary of agriculture for food safety. "But the product was produced in noncompliance with our regulations, so therefore we do have to take this action."

Federal officials called the recall by Westland/Hallmark Meat Packing Company the largest beef recall in U.S. history.

Raymond said cattle that had passed pre-slaughter inspections but then lost the ability to walk were slaughtered without being re-examined for chronic illness by an inspector, a practice he said violated federal regulations and had been going on for at least two years. [Watch video of cows being abused »](#)

In January, the Humane Society of the United States accused Westland/Hallmark of abusing "downed" cattle. The Humane Society released video that showed workers kicking cows, jabbing them near their eyes, ramming them with a forklift and shooting high-pressure water up their noses in an effort to force them to their feet for slaughter.

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The USDA suspended operations at the plant in Chino, California, after the video was released.

California prosecutors on Friday announced animal cruelty charges against two former employees of the plant.

Federal regulations are aimed at preventing the spread of bovine spongiform encephalopathy, popularly known as mad cow disease, and other diseases.

Raymond said the average age of the cattle involved is 5 to 7 years, meaning most of them were probably born long after a 1997 ban on a type of cattle feed suspected to cause the disease. He said the incidence of the disease in U.S. cattle is "extremely rare."

It's important to keep downed cattle out of the food supply because the animals have weaker immune systems and sometimes wallow in feces, raising the risk of contamination, according to The Associated Press.

In a statement issued February 3, Westland Meat President Steve Mendell said that the company was cooperating with the USDA and that the practices depicted in the Humane Society video are "a serious breach of our company's policies and training."

"We have taken swift action regarding the two employees identified on the video and have already implemented aggressive measures to ensure all employees follow our humane handling policies and procedures," Mendell said.

The recall dates back to February 1, 2006, and Raymond said "the great majority" of the meat has probably been eaten.

"A lot of this is fresh, raw product and with ground beef, et cetera, that has a very short shelf life and refrigerator life," he said.

About 37 million pounds of the recalled meat went to school lunch programs and other federal nutrition programs since October 2006, said Ron Vogel of the [USDA](#)'s Food and Nutrition Service.

Most of the beef was sent to distribution centers in bulk packages. The USDA said it will work with distributors to determine how much meat remains, the AP reported.

The largest U.S. meat recall before Sunday came in 1999, when about 35 million pounds of product possibly contaminated with listeria were ordered off shelves. USDA officials said that was Class I recall, involving a known risk to human health.

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Sunday's action was a Class II recall, under which authorities say there is "a remote probability" the meat could cause illness.

The amount of beef -- 143 million pounds -- is roughly enough for two hamburgers for each man, woman and child in the United States. [E-mail to a friend](#) 

CNN's Jen Pifer contributed to this report.

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