

August 5, 2004

Secretary Ann Veneman  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
Jamie L. Whitten Building  
14<sup>th</sup> Street & Independence Avenue, S.W.  
Room 200-A  
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Veneman:

On August 3, 2004, the Food Safety and Inspection Service announced a voluntary recall by Carneco Foods, LLC of approximately 497,000 pounds of frozen ground beef and beef patties after five people in Minnesota and Wisconsin became sick from meat suspected of being contaminated with *E. coli* O157:H7. Once again, consumers have been put on alert without the necessary information that they need to protect themselves. The Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) urges USDA to disclose the names and location of stores, restaurants, and other venues to which contaminated meat is distributed and sold to consumers during every recall.

In this most recent recall only limited information was released to the public. It included the producer's name, production dates and packaging code information. However ground beef is frequently repackaged at the stores where it is purchased. As a result identifying information is often lost leaving consumers to play a guessing game as to whether the meat or poultry in their refrigerator is part of a recall.

USDA's current recall policy protects the economic interests of meat processors at the expense of public health. USDA will only share distribution lists of a firm recalling meat or poultry products with states that agree not to publicly identify the locations of where the potentially tainted meat has been distributed and sold.<sup>1</sup> States are required to sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in order to get the much needed information. As a consequence, state and local health departments in approximately 10 states that have signed an MOU - potentially including both Minnesota and Wisconsin - are prevented from accomplishing their primary mission of protecting public health by informing citizens of where recalled meat was sold in their state. This critical information would allow consumers to determine if the meat they have purchased is part of a recall before it is consumed.

Secretary Anne Veneman

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<sup>1</sup> 67 Fed. Reg. 20009 (Apr. 24, 2002).

In an effort to address this critical flaw in the food safety system, CSPI will be launching a new “Where’s the Beef?” Campaign. The purpose of this campaign is to ensure that consumers have the critical information they need protect their families during a recall. Today we are filing a Freedom of Information Act request with USDA for the distribution records for the recalled meat produced by Carneco Foods, LLC. We hope USDA will change its policy and give consumers the information they need to protect their families. Additionally, CSPI will submit a Freedom of Information Act request for distribution lists of where tainted meat is distributed and sold every time meat that reaches the public is recalled.

CSPI urges USDA to address this critical flaw in the food safety system. Disclosure of distribution lists informing the public where potentially tainted meat was sold is essential during a recall. When consumers are armed with this information they can more readily identify the recalled product. Consumers need your leadership on this important public health issue.

Sincerely,

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Michael F. Jacobson, Ph.D.  
Executive Director

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Caroline Smith DeWaal  
Director, Food Safety Program

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Ken Kelly  
Food Safety Attorney