



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on March 12, 2012

## “Pink Slime” Finding Its Way Into Nation’s Ground Beef

The food additive — officially (and seriously) called “lean finely textured beef,” and which federal law allows to make up as much as 15 percent of ground beef — “is a mixture of leftover trimmings, sinew, and other beef parts culled from a cow once the expensive and more recognizable cuts of meat have been harvested and sent to a butcher,” reported the [Blaze](#). “The collection of leftovers is spun in a centrifuge to remove excess fat, washed in a disinfecting solution and then minced for use in various applications.”



Shockingly, these micro-ground odds and ends that used to be shipped to dog food manufacturers may be in as much as 70 percent of what passes as ground beef in America.

The good news, according to [ABC News](#), is that a public media blitz by “celebrity chef” Jamie Oliver exposing the use of the disgusting — but apparently safe — meat byproduct in the food service industry convinced America’s favorite burger place, McDonald’s, to stop adding pink slime to its beef (it had used the product in its hamburgers since 2004). Burger King and Taco Bell said they would also drop the product from their meat. (Watch this short segment from Oliver’s *Food Revolution* TV show.)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wshlnRWnf30>

The bad news is that other fast food companies, restaurants, and grocery stores have not been as willing to suspend the use of a product that cuts costs and increases their profits. As for the USDA, it has apparently been riding the pink slime gravy train for a while now. Last year alone the agency’s federal school lunch program used an estimated five and a half million pounds of the substance. This is the same program that First Lady Michelle Obama has taken under her wing to ensure that America’s school children are eating healthier lunches.

According to the [New York Times](#), pink slime is the invention of a South Dakota company, [Beef Products, Inc.](#), that came up with a cost-effective way to help the USDA deal with the deadly E. coli outbreak that was giving American ground beef a bad name. The method was simple: inject the meat with ammonia.

The *Times* reported that the company “had been looking to expand into the hamburger business with a product made from beef that included fatty trimmings the industry once relegated to pet food and cooking oil. The trimmings were particularly susceptible to contamination, but a study commissioned by the company showed that the ammonia process would kill E. coli as well as salmonella.”

USDA officials were so impressed by how effectively the company’s ammonia treatment killed germs in the meat that when the agency “began routine testing of meat used in hamburger sold to the general public, they exempted Beef Products.” That meant a rubber stamp for the company’s pink slime concoction, which “has become a mainstay in America’s hamburgers,” noted the *Times*.

Unfortunately, since then E. coli and salmonella have been found “dozens of times in Beef Products



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meat,” the *Times* found, prompting the USDA to revoke the company’s exemption from testing and to launch a review of the company’s operations and research.

Nonetheless, don’t expect pink slime to immediately disappear from ground beef used in school lunches, or from the hamburgers in many fast food joints. The lower cost is still a draw. But Gerald Zirnstein, the USDA scientist who coined the term “pink slime” to describe the highly refined beef byproducts concoction, told [ABC News](#) that any company that markets as “fresh ground beef” any meat that contains the bizarre additive is, in essence, committing “economic fraud. It’s not fresh ground beef.... It’s a cheap substitute being added in.”

In a 2002 e-mail to USDA colleagues, Zirnstein wrote: “I do not consider the stuff to be ground beef, and I consider allowing it in ground beef to be a form of fraudulent labeling.”

Another USDA scientist, Carl Custer, agreed, telling ABC News that the product is less than beef — “a salvage product ... fat that had been heated at a low temperature and the excess fat spun out.”

Thus far, restaurant owners and school lunch ladies have not been moved by the news that what they are serving is a cheap and nasty cousin of ground beef. After all, they can save a few bucks and no one need be any the wiser.

What might be a deal-breaker for pink slime, however, is its smell. Some of the outlets using the product have complained of a strong ammonia odor emanating from the “meat.” According to the *New York Times*, the state of Georgia returned nearly 7,000 pounds of the substance purchased from Beef Products “after cooks who were making meatloaf for state prisoners detected a ‘very strong odor of ammonia’ in 60-pound blocks of the trimmings, state records show.”

Recalled Dr. Charles Tant, an official with the state’s agriculture department: “It was frozen, but you could still smell ammonia. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

While Georgia officials thought the smell meant the product was contaminated and alerted USDA officials, “Beef Products said the ammonia did not pose a danger and would be diluted when its beef was mixed with other meat,” the *Times* reported. “The USDA accepted Beef Product’s conclusion, but other customers had also complained about the smell.”

The USDA has staunchly defended its use of the pink slime meat product in its school lunch program and elsewhere, declaring in a statement that all its “ground beef purchases must meet the highest standards for food safety.”

That has not stopped concerned parents and nutritionists from launching a petition drive to pressure the agriculture agency to drop the “meat” from school lunch menus. [MSNBC](#) reported that the Change.org petition drive — entitled “[STOP the use of ‘pink slime’ in our children’s school food!](#)” — had garnered almost 20,000 signatures as of March 9.

“We don’t know which districts are receiving what meat, and this meat isn’t labeled to show pink slime,” noted Bettina Siegal, who posts on [TheLunchTray.com](#) and is one of the individuals responsible for the campaign. “They don’t have to under federal law. We should step back and say, ‘Why would we feed this to our kids?’”

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