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Wilson County Agricultural Article from Ruth Correll, Agricultural Extension Agent

The October issue of Consumer Reports magazine, which is due on newsstands this week, will contain an article in regard to the food safety of ground beef. Consumer Reports is a highly respected magazine and we often rely on their research when making decisions about items we plan to purchase. This time I believe they missed their benchmark of accurate consumer information which readers can use to make buying decisions. I hope the following will help put this information in the proper perspective.

Food is not sterile. That is the reason we properly wash food items, we store food items at the recommended temperatures and we cook food to the proper temperatures. The good news is the Consumer Reports study did not find pathogenic bacteria like shiga-toxin producing E. coli (STECs) in any of the ground beef samples, including conventional beef. Controlling pathogenic bacteria is the key in terms of ensuring safety. Unfortunately, the Consumer Reports study confuses that issue with the finding of generic E. coli and other bacteria that are not commonly associated with illnesses from consuming undercooked ground beef. It is important to remember that all ground beef should be cooked to an internal temperature of 160 degrees Fahrenheit and confirmed with an instant-read meat thermometer, as recommended by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and other food safety experts.

The number one priority of the beef industry is to produce the safest beef possible. Ground beef is the safest it has ever been with greater than 90 percent reductions in bacteria such as E. coli O157:H7 and significant reductions in salmonella in recent years. The beef community continues to invest millions of dollars in developing new safety technologies with the goal of eliminating foodborne illness.

Another confusing point is the claim that “organic and/or grass-fed” beef is safer. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, “organic” and “grass-fed” labels do not imply any additional safety factor. Dr. Faith Critzer, assistant professor, Microbiological Food Safety and Food Antimicrobials, at the University of Tennessee says “this leads consumers to believe organic and grass-fed beef are safer and could make them think they do not need to cook those products to 160 °F, creating a food safety concern. It is important to note that bacteria is also found in organic and grass-fed samples. The bottom-line is that no matter what the label says ground beef should be cooked to 160 °F as a final step to ensure safety.”

“It is also important to note that S. aureus and C. perfringens that were found in the Consumer Reports study are toxin-producing bacteria but they are typically associated with picnic-type food poisoning cases where food has been left out for long periods of time at the incorrect temperature, not undercooked ground beef,” according to Dr. Critzer.

Also, use of the term “sustainable” in the Consumer Reports article is confusing. “Organic” and grass-fed” are marketing terms. Neither of these terms are an accurate indicator of either sustainability
or safety. “Beef sustainability is defined as producing more product with fewer inputs,” which is the goal of every beef producer in this country. To cattle farmers and ranchers, sustainability means balancing environmental responsibility, economic opportunity, and social diligence while meeting the growing global demand for beef.”

Antibiotic resistance was also raised in this article. This is a very complex issue that is being addressed both in human and animal medicine. The FDA has released guidance which is eliminating the use of antibiotics for growth promotion in animals. It is important that efforts to minimize antimicrobial resistance, including promoting appropriate and judicious use of antimicrobials in both humans and animals are continued.

Cattle farmers are committed to safety, environmental quality and high quality beef. The industry as a whole invests approximately $550 million annually in beef safety research and technology implementation. Beef producers are beef consumers, just like the rest of us, and they want a safe and high quality product just like everyone else.

Agricultural Market Summary

Cattle Market Trends
The old saying is “What goes up must come down.” Slaughter cow prices fell as steer and heifer prices took a big hit. Feeder steers under 600 lbs. $13 to $20 lower, over 600 lbs. $7 to $9 lower, $159.00-$310.00; Feeder heifers $9 to $13 lower, $150.00-$270.00; Slaughter cows $4 to $6 lower, $75.00-$107.00; Slaughter bulls unevenly steady, $118.00-$145.00.

Grain Market Trends
Corn, soybeans, cotton, and wheat were down for the week. Corn – Cash prices, $3.38-$3.88. September futures closed at $3.63 a bushel, down 2 cents. Soybeans – Cash prices, $8.50-$9.26. September futures closed at $8.93 a bushel, down 12 cents. Wheat – No reported cash prices. September futures closed at $4.77 a bushel, down 22 cents

Goat & Sheep Market
Goats - Slaughter kids, $151.00-$260.00; Yearlings, $139.00-$200.00; Slaughter bucks, $121.00-$150.00; Slaughter nannies, $117.00-$190.00; Feeder kids, $170.00-$190.00. Sheep – Slaughter lambs, $131.00-$231.00; Slaughter ewes, $88.00-$100.00.

For additional information on these and other topics, contact the UT Extension Office, 925 East Baddour Parkway, Lebanon, TN 37087, 615-444-9584 or acorrell@utk.edu. UT Extension provides equal opportunities in all programs. Visit the UT/TSU Extension webpage at http://utextension.tennessee.edu/wilson or look for UT & TSU Extension, Wilson County on Facebook.

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