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School district ordered to toss beef

By Natalie Ragus/Staff Writer

Four North County school districts have been ordered to dispose of all recalled beef shipments from a Chino Hills-based slaughterhouse and meat distributor.

The California Department of Education ordered the districts - Guadalupe Union, Santa Maria Joint Union High School, Los Alamos Elementary, and Santa Ynez Valley Union High School Districts - to destroy an estimated 3,300 pounds of meat from the Westland/Hallmark Meat Co.

During the first week of February, the California Department of Education advised all districts to hold shipments from Westland/Hallmark for safety testing after accusations of animal cruelty and inadequate inspection of cattle surfaced against the distributor.

While tests did not find anything wrong with the shipments, the results were inconclusive, prompting state officials to order the meat destroyed, district officials said.

"It's fine, and now it's all gone, and we can go back to reality," said Lonnie Clark, who heads the food services department at Santa Ynez.

As soon as the state issued the initial hold, she added, the meat was immediately set aside so it would not accidentally end up on the school lunch line.

An undercover Humane Society video brought to light the alleged abuse of nonambulatory cattle, and sparked what federal officials have termed the largest beef recall in U.S. history.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture recalled 143 million pounds of beef on Feb. 17. The recall affects Westland/Hallmark beef dating to Feb. 1, 2006.

Federal officials estimated that 37 million pounds of the questionable meat entered the school lunch program, most of which may have already been eaten. However, there have been no reports of illness from the meat.

Santa Maria High School District officials said they will destroy 41 cases of the recalled meat.

Guadalupe officials said their district will dispose of six cases of the recalled beef, while Santa Ynez officials said their district will dispose of two cases.

Los Alamos officials could not be reached for comment, but the CDE said that district had received a shipment of six cases of Westland/Hallmark beef.

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Meat that is to be destroyed due to a recall is pictured Friday at the Santa Maria School District. //lan Gonzaga/Staff

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Each case weighs approximately 60 pounds, local officials said.

The video depicts Westland/Hallmark employees shoving downed cattle with forklifts, as well as kicking, shocking and otherwise abusing the animals.

Downed animals are often banned from the food chain because of the high possibility that they may carry diseases.

However, with the approval of a veterinarian, some downer animals may be allowed into the food chain.

The USDA alleges that Westland/Hallmark did not follow proper procedures and contact a veterinarian when an animal became non-ambulatory after initial inspection.

The company has publicly defended itself, saying that it has taken swift action against the employees accused of the abuse.

However, despite the company's efforts to revamp its image, California school districts will no longer use products from the beleaguered company.

On Friday, the head of the Food Services Department of the Santa Maria High School District was preparing to get rid of the district's supply of recalled beef.

Carla Hart said her employees have stacked the beef in a freezer in the district's warehouse, and would seal it in plastic bags on Monday for pick-up by the city.

Though the state will reimburse the district for the destroyed meat, "we're not expecting much," Hart said.

That's because each case is only worth about \$3.50.

Meanwhile, representatives from the local chapter of the California Cattlemen's Association said they wanted to assure the public that it could have faith in beef products.

"We have such a stringent health program with our vaccinations and the way we handle the cattle that we're very confident that the beef we produce is OK," said John R. Wysong, adding that Westland/Hallmark is not a Cattlemen's Association member.

February 24, 2008

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