

Health Awareness

Keeping American Meat Safe

(NAPSA)—The meat Americans buy is the safest it's ever been, according to industry experts. One reason is a 100-year-old federal law that puts meat inspectors in every meat plant. Yet most consumers don't understand the frequency or intensity of meat inspection done in the U.S. by the Department of Agriculture, according to new data from the American Meat Institute (AMI).

The 2006 data showed many consumers thought banking (35 percent) is more heavily regulated and inspected than the meat industry (21 percent). Yet meat inspectors by law must be present in meat-packing plants during every minute of operations.

Sixty percent of consumers also underestimated the inspection frequency, with most saying that inspectors visited plants "occasionally." Only 12 percent of respondents responded accurately that meat inspectors are in packing plants continuously.

A Healthy Effect

While consumers may not be aware of inspectors' presence, bacteria seem to be. Data reflect major food safety improvements:

- Incidence of the bacteria *E. coli* O157:H7 on ground beef is down 80 percent since 1999.
- *Salmonella* on ground beef is down 75 percent since 1998.
- *Listeria* on ready-to-eat meat and poultry products has been slashed by 75 percent since 1998.
- Food-borne illnesses associated with these bacteria are also declining, according to the Centers for Disease Control.

Interestingly, each year Americans spend less of their disposable income on meat—just 2 percent in 2004. The U.S. overall spends less of its disposable income on food



Safety First—A 100-year-old law requires inspectors to be present during every minute of operation in a meat-packing plant.

than any other nation in the world.

"Many Americans have become accustomed to seeing a USDA seal on their meat, but they may not know what that seal represents: one of the toughest and most comprehensive inspection systems anywhere in the world," said AMI President J. Patrick Boyle. Still, Boyle reminds people that although meat and poultry safety are at their best levels in history, consumers still need to handle and cook meat carefully to prevent food-borne illnesses:

- **Temperature Control**—Keep hot foods hot and cold foods cold. The danger zone for bacterial growth is between 40° and 140°. Refrigerators should be kept at 40° or below.
- **Separate**—Keep raw and cooked foods separate to prevent cross contamination.
- **Clean**—Wash hands, cutting boards, utensils and surfaces thoroughly to prevent contamination.
- **Cook**—Cook meat and poultry to recommended temperatures using a thermometer to ensure proper doneness.

For more information, visit www.meatsafety.org.