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Industry News - AM
Meatingplace exclusive interview: eFoodAlert's Phyllis Entis on LFTB

By Michael Fielding on 3/23/2012

More than two years passed between the 2009 *New York Times*' article that introduced Beef Products Inc. (BPI) to the general public and celebrity chef Jamie Oliver's melodramatic toss of a hunk of ground beef into a washing machine earlier this year.

It wasn't until earlier this month – when news app startup *The Daily* reported that the USDA planned to continue its purchase of lean finely textured beef (LFTB) from BPI through the National School Lunch Program – that the hammer came down on BPI for its use of ammonium hydroxide as an intervention in the process of making the product.

From national media outlets to activist bloggers, BPI, its product, and even the USDA have been battered by critics – until a microbiologist came to their defense. In her blog, eFoodAlert, Phyllis Entis has argued pointedly and intelligently in support of such interventions. She should know: From 1972 to 1979 she headed a microbiology lab group in the Canadian Health Protection Branch (the equivalent of the FDA that has since merged into the Canadian Food Inspection Agency).

Since then she has served as a consultant of rapid testing methods to major food companies across North America. She talked to **Meatingplace** about the uproar over LFTB and what – if anything – the industry can do to control it.

Meatingplace: At the North American Meat Processors management conference last weekend, Jim Marsden said that the industry has lost the PR battle on this issue. Do you agree?

ENTIS: The industry was hoping it wouldn't have to address it. Negative messages are so much easier to disseminate than positive messages; all you have to do is put a handy catch phrase and you're off and running. I'm seeing a very strange situation among consumers: People want everything to be safe in absolute terms, but they also want it to be all-natural.

Meatingplace: Should the USDA have stepped up more to defend the process? Was this decision to offer school districts a choice just an election-year move to avoid any more dust-ups?

ENTIS: One way or another the agency was going to have to offer a choice, because it was going to be dealing with a lot of angry consumers. There has been a fundamental conflict of interest in the USDA since its inception. It cannot be both a promoter of the food and agricultural industry and also a regulator of the food and agriculture industry. Australia has a

unified agency (Food Standards Australia New Zealand) that seems to function reasonably well. In an ideal world, I would like to see the regulatory functions of the USDA and the food regulatory functions of the FDA consolidated into a single agency. The logical home would be Health and Human Services, but it would have a seat the Cabinet table because it is that important.

Meatingplace: Why haven't the critics caught Cargill in their sights yet? It's the same process, only with citric acid. Is it just a matter of time before the entire process – not just BPI's proprietary use of ammonium hydroxide – comes under fire?

ENTIS: Citric acid has a pleasant connotation to it. It doesn't have that "I use that to clean my floors" association. Scientists have lost their collective halos. Scientists have lost the aura of being dispassionate and independent truth-tellers. These days people's trust is based on intuition and proximity rather on science.

Meatingplace: BPI hasn't been implicated in an *E. coli*-related recall, and that's a direct result of innovation that has helped eliminate – in this case at least – the incidence of E. coli in ground beef. What's your take on the impact of this controversy on innovation in the industry?

ENTIS: This kind of news coverage has tendency to discourage innovation. It certainly would make some companies think twice about the full gamut of possible interventions. We've seen this in terms of irradiation. I don't know how to change consumers' mindset. BPI is holding this product in-warehouse until it gets the test results. That is their standard procedure. How many companies do test-and-hold as a routine? There's no excuse for releasing product before test results are in any more. When you can do a 24- or 48-hour turnaround on your lab results, you can afford to hold your product until your test results come back.

Meatingplace: Now we're hearing that it's not so much the use of interventions that the public is angry about but that it's kept in the dark about the ingredients in their food. Is this simply a labeling issue, as bloggers and activists are only now making it out to be?

ENTIS: It's a moving target. What will happen here is what happened with the bovine growth hormone issue in milk last decade. Initially consumers revolted against these genetically engineered hormones. It wasn't a labeling issue. Consumers cried about food safety, then when they learned it was safe they said that they still wanted to know if their milk was from genetically engineered cows, so it ended up being a labeling issue. What we're dealing with is not logic on the part of these consumers. It's emotion.