AMI gets aggressive on “meat glue” issue

By Michael Fielding on 5/11/2012

No one questions why the ingredients in vegetable soup aren’t listed on the local menu, so there’s no reason that two enzymes used to bind meat products should be.

That’s essentially the message that the American Meat Institute conveyed to about two dozen members of both the mainstream and trade media Thursday afternoon in a media call to set the record straight over what it’s calling inaccuracies regarding the use of enzymes transglutaminase (TG) and beef fibrin (BF).

Representatives of the two most common binding products – Activa and Fibrimex – joined Mark D. Dopp, senior vice president of regulatory affairs and general counsel for AMI, and Dana Hanson, extension meat scientist at North Carolina State University, on the media call.

Controlling the message

Christiaan Penning of Fibrimex told reporters that the product is used to create a better form to cut into fillets. “They are natural proteins occurring in the meat itself but used in a more intelligent way,” he said, adding that the products are used largely in foodservice applications.

But that wasn’t enough for one reporter. Jim Avila, senior national correspondent for ABC News, asked several pointed questions about the possibility that some lower quality trimmings are being reassembled and passed off as a higher value product.

“(Consumers) ask for filet mignon but what they’re getting is in fact not a single piece of meat,” Avila said. “Have you ever seen a cruise ship put it on the menu that it is pre-formed?”

“They’re getting the same filet mignon that they would have otherwise gotten,” Penning responded — to which Avila responded that although it’s labeled as such, the message rarely, if ever, gets through to consumers.

“The question is a fair question,” said Brendan Naulty, senior vice president of Ajinomoto North America, which makes Activa. “But are all of the ingredients in vegetable soup disclosed to the consumer?”

“We’re not talking about vegetable soup,” Avila replied. “We’re talking

about this product."

Not only is it illegal to reassemble two different types of meat and mislead the consumer, but it's impractical, the panelists said. The tenderness of an illegally reassembled fillet made from chuck would be noticeable, said Hanson, who has conducted studies to see what such a product would taste like.

"You can take smaller pieces and reassemble them, but their eating quality is significantly different than the application we're talking about here with filets," he said. "This is the quality you can expect if you're trying to mislead the consumer."

Media inaccuracies

Taking a cue from the LFTB debacle, earlier this week Tyson Foods Inc. and Cargill Inc. responded quickly to media reports about whether the enzymes are used in their products (they're not).

Tyson spokesman Gary Mickelson told Meatingplace that although the company has researched transglutaminase, it does not use it in its products.

In particular, Cargill blasted Scripps Howard News Service over its May 8 report claiming that the products are widely used in the industry.

"The writer of the article said he had contacted us and made it sound as though we would not disclose the use of these products. In fact, we cannot find any record of the reporter ever contacting Cargill," Cargill spokesman Mike Martin told Meatingplace. "He didn't contact me and says he called our consumer relations toll-free number. There is no record of that call in our database. There were numerous errors, omissions and misrepresentations in both articles produced by Scripps Howard. We are also monitoring increased interest on the part of broadcast TV media, especially ABC and its affiliates."

Meanwhile, on its website AMI is offering a video, fact sheet and a blog to address the issue. "This is the first step in formally dialoging with reporters," Riley said. "We're definitely making an effort to engage. This is not secret, much as people would like to characterize it in that way."

Questions of safety

One concern raised by reporters was the safety of the products. Since they bind the surface of meats, pathogens may become trapped inside the newly formed product.

USDA cooking requirements of 145 degrees plus a 3-minute rest time will achieve an end point temperature of 160 degrees for instantaneous lethality, Hanson said, assuring one food writer that consumers can still order their fillets medium rare.

Neither Activa, which has been on the U.S. market for 16 years, nor Fibrimex, which was introduced in 1994, has been associated with foodborne illness.