

143 million pounds of beef being recalled

Slaughterhouse supplied schools

By GREG RISLING

Associated Press

Los Angeles — The U.S. Department of Agriculture on Sunday ordered the recall of 143 million pounds of frozen beef from a California slaughterhouse that is the subject of an animal-abuse investigation and provided meat to school lunch programs.

Officials said it is the largest beef recall in the United States, surpassing a 1999 ban of 35 million pounds of ready-to-eat meats.

No illnesses have been linked to the newly recalled meat, and officials said the health threat is likely small.

The recall will affect beef products dating to Feb. 1, 2006, that came from Chino-based Westland/Hallmark Meat Co., the federal agency said.

Secretary of Agriculture Ed Schafer said his department has evidence that Westland did not routinely contact its veterinarian when cattle became non-ambulatory after passing inspection, violating health regulations.

"Because the cattle did not receive complete and proper inspection, Food Safety and Inspection Service has determined them to be unfit for human food and the company is conducting a recall," Schafer said in a statement.

A phone message left for Westland President Steve Mendell was not immediately returned.

Federal officials suspended operations at Westland/Hallmark after an undercover Humane Society of the United States video surfaced showing crippled and sick animals being shoved with forklifts.

Two former employees were charged Friday. Five felony counts of animal cruelty and three misdemeanors were filed against a pen manager. Three misdemeanor counts of illegal movement of a non-ambulatory animal were filed against an employee who worked under that manager. Both were fired.

Authorities said the video showed workers kicking, shocking and otherwise abusing animals that were apparently too sick or injured to walk into the slaughterhouse. Some animals had water forced down their throats, San Bernardino County prosecutor Michael Ramos said.

No charges have been filed against Westland, but an investigation by federal authorities continues.

Officials estimate that 37 million pounds of the re-

called beef went to school programs, but they think most of the meat probably already has been eaten.

"We don't know how much product is out there right now. We don't think there is a health hazard, but we do have to take this action," said Dick Raymond, department undersecretary for food safety.

Most of the beef was sent to distribution centers in bulk packages. The Agriculture Department said it will work with distributors to determine how much meat remains.

Federal regulations call for keeping downed cattle out of the food supply because they might pose a higher risk of contamination from E. coli, salmonella or mad cow disease because they typically wallow in feces and their immune systems are often weak.

About 150 school districts around the nation have stopped using ground beef from Hallmark Meat Packing Co., which is associated with Westland.

Authorities say a humane society video shows workers **kicking, shocking** and otherwise **abusing** animals that were sick or injured.

Two fast-food chains, Jack in the Box and In-N-Out, said they would not use beef from Westland/Hallmark.

Other chains such as McDonald's and Burger King said they do not buy beef from Westland.

Upon learning about the recall, some legislators criticized the USDA, saying it should conduct more thorough inspections to ensure tainted beef doesn't get to the public.

"Today marks the largest beef recall in U.S. history, and it involves the national school lunch program and other federal food and nutrition programs," said U.S. Sen. Tom Harkin (D-Iowa), chairman of the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry. "This begs the question: How much longer will we continue to test our luck with weak enforcement of federal food safety regulations?"