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Most recalled meat is never recovered, likely is eaten

By Julie Schmit and Barbara Hansen, USA TODAY

Consumers may draw comfort from federal meat recalls that alert stores, restaurants and households to potentially unsafe meat.

But most recalled meat is never recovered — raising the possibility that it was consumed before or even after the recall — according to a USA TODAY analysis of recall data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

For 73 meat recalls this year and last, recovery rates per recall averaged 44%, the analysis shows. But for five recalls that followed reports of consumer illness, recovery rates per recall averaged just 20%.

Recovery rates vary for several reasons, including how quickly meat gets to market and the number of days between production and when problems are detected.

"The closer those dates are to each other, the more we get back," says Kenneth Petersen, USDA assistant administrator.

He says recalls spawned by reports of illness have low recovery rates because weeks or months can pass between when a product is produced, someone gets sick and illness is linked with food.

In contrast, recalls resulting from the USDA's product testing tend to result in higher recovery rates.

The USDA, which regulates meat and poultry, routinely samples thousands of products for harmful bacteria before they leave factories. Test results take a few days to produce.

During that time, companies can legally ship a product. If tests are positive, the product is recalled. Because the meat has been in the market a few days, recovery rates tend to be good: 62% per recall, on average.

There have been 54 meat recalls this year, up from 34 last year. For the most recent recalls, recovery rates are not yet available.

To get more consumers to check homes for recalled meats, the USDA next year plans to publicize names of retailers selling meat that was later recalled. "We think it would be helpful for people to know, 'Gee, that is my store,' " says Petersen.

Recall notices now posted on the USDA's website typically name states where a product was sent but not retailers, unless their names are on the product. Retailer names have been considered confidential business information, as with any customer lists.

Company actions also affect recalls. Typically, recallers alert their customers, often distributors or wholesalers, who alert their customers, and so on. But recovery of products isn't a given.

On Sept. 29, Topps Meat recalled 21.7 million pounds of frozen hamburger because of potential contamination with the deadly E. coli O157:H7 bacteria. The recall, the second-biggest ever for ground beef, was well publicized. Still, New Jersey officials found 141 boxes of recalled burgers in 12 state stores about a month after the recall.

Some retailers said they didn't know about the recall, says New Jersey consumer affairs spokesman Jeff Lamm.

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