

## When a Name Can Change Perception

In recent weeks, there has been a lot of national news regarding a product called lean finely textured beef. Last April, celebrity chef, Jamie Oliver, known for his crusade to change the eating habits of the world dubbed this product "pink slime" because of his interpretation of its physical appearance. Now, 11 months later, CBS, NBC, ABC, Fox and other national media sources have all been running troubling news casts of this product. Once it hit the social media scene, like the blogs, email, and Facebook, "pink slime" conversation, myths, accusations, and defenses have run like wild fire. There is no stopping it.

So what are we really talking about? Beef Products Inc (BPI) is the world's leading producer of lean beef processed from fresh beef trimmings. Beef trim is the meat and fat remaining after larger cuts of beef have been "trimmed", hence the name. This trim is often used in ground beef and is found in 70% of the ground beef sold in the U.S.

On its website, BPI says, "as a part of our commitment to provide the safest lean beef possible, research drove us to create the pH enhancement process, which relies upon slightly increasing the level of ammonium hydroxide already present in beef in order to elevate its pH. Ammonium hydroxide is naturally found in beef, other proteins, and virtually all foods. It is widely used in the processing of numerous foods, such as baked goods, cheeses, gelatins, chocolate, caramels, and puddings. One result of this food safety system is the dramatic reduction in the number of potential pathogens that may be present in foods, such as E.coli O157:H7."

Those with little knowledge of the food industry claim that household ammonia is being used in the beef supply. That is simply untrue. Ammonium hydroxide (ammonia and water) are naturally occurring compounds that have been used in food since 1974 and in beef since 2001. None the less, food with ammonium hydroxide embedded in it, is not labeled so consumers did not know this was being used until national press and social media made them aware.

The Food and Drug Administration rates this compound as "GRAS" (Generally Recognized as Safe), the highest safety attribution the agency assigns to compounds. Even USDA has made the statement that the BPI's Boneless Lean Beef Trimmings are safe, wholesome, and nutritious.

Still, because of all of the media attention, consumers are concerned. Mothers are forming petitions to remove this product from their children's schools. Public opinion has become fact, and public outcry has influenced business decisions.

Cattle producers should be concerned about all of this. As specialists in animal husbandry, cattle producers work tirelessly for months to produce a safe, wholesome, and quality product. Yet, it is out of producers' hands once it enters the next phase of the supply chain, the processor. Still, this product is deemed safe by government officials. Should producers be outraged that BPI has created this filler and added it to ground beef? Should producers defend this product?

It is not our (cattle producers') product. This is a product customized by a company, not raised and grown by a producer. Still, we all have a stake in the industry. We do not want consumers to lose faith in the wholesomeness of our product. Transparency is the key, and that did not happen until the industry was under fire. Now, consumers are looking at the cattle and beef industry experts as defense attorneys trying to manipulate the system to keep their defendants out of trouble.

Whichever side of the fence you are on, here are the FACTS. Someone didn't like a product and nicknamed it "pink slime." The negative connotation hit the media, picked up momentum, and influenced public opinion. Public opinion then put enough pressure on USDA to change its school lunch program policy and allow school districts to choose whether they wanted to purchase beef with this product in it. Public backlash has also influenced stores like Safeway Inc., the second-largest US supermarket chain, to stop buying ground beef containing lean finely textured beef.

So, no matter what the truth is, those are facts. A name can change perception and truth can be in the

eye of the beholder. At the end of the day though, it is the consumer that will drive the industry. It is always important to be in front of what the consumer wants, to be proactive, to be honest, to be transparent, and to be educators when it comes to the products produced. If not, negative media, whether right or wrong, can hurt all of us .