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Washington, DC 20510-1304

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The Honorable Ed Schafer
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Mr. Schafer:

I am writing in response to a recent investigation of the animal welfare and food safety practices of the Hallmark Meat Packing Company and the Westland Meat Company, two branches of a California meat processing facility that is a leading supplier of ground beef to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) National School Lunch Program (NSLP). This matter was brought to my attention by representatives of the Humane Society of the United States who claim to have filmed animal operations at Hallmark and Westland.

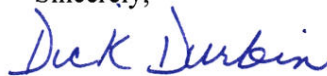
The footage I have seen shows what appear to be inhumane practices, including the repeated use of electric prods on animals unable to stand or walk unassisted and the binding the and dragging of weak animals. The use of these practices on weak animals raises questions about the health and welfare of the animals and the safety of meat products made at this facility. In addition, some of the animals in the video footage appear to be non-ambulatory cattle, or those unable to rise from a recumbent position. Under a December 30, 2003, USDA FSIS rule, animals meeting this definition should not be allowed to be slaughtered for human food.

It is troubling to hear that this California facility is the second largest supplier of ground beef to the School Lunch Program. More than 30 million meals per day are served to our nation's schoolchildren through this program. Because children are more susceptible to food borne illness than other segments of the population, it is vitally important that USDA take every step necessary to ensure the safety and nutritional quality of food procured for the program.

Fully understanding that USDA clearly has enforcement authority of the relevant statutes, I believe it is my responsibility to alert you to this matter. In this case, I believe it would be appropriate for USDA personnel to review the video footage from this investigation and take further action if it is determined that there were violations of the law. Apart from this request, I understand that the matter will be decided on its merits by the appropriate personnel.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. If you have any questions, please contact David Lazarus of my staff at (202) 224-2152.

Sincerely,



Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator