



Carolina Journal Exclusives

## Mystery Meat Could Be Reality in N.C. School Districts No state, local checks on school-lunch food donated by the feds

By David N. Bass

February 17, 2010

RALEIGH — It arrives by the truckload: frozen meat that ends up on the plates of thousands of students in North Carolina schools every day. One-fifth comes courtesy of the federal government; school districts purchase the rest through private distributors.

But a recent article in *USA Today* — reporting that safety standards for beef, chicken, and other meat donated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture are frequently less stringent than for fast-food restaurants — has advocates concerned.

State and local nutrition officials don't check whether commodities donated by the federal government, amounting to 12.5 million pounds in North Carolina for the 2009-10 school year, are high quality, or even whether they're safe for kids to eat.

For some observers, that's bringing a whole new meaning to the proverbial "mystery meat" served in school cafeterias.

"I wouldn't go near it. It looked horrible," said Larry Sand, a school-reform advocate and retired Title I coordinator at a Los Angeles middle school, when describing the usual fare offered by school cafeterias.

The question is relevant since *USA Today* found evidence that the government served meat over the last three years "that wouldn't meet the quality or safety standards of many fast-food restaurants."

McDonald's, Burger King, and Costco, for example, check the pathogen content of beef five to 10 times more frequently during a typical production day than the USDA does for its meat. The USDA supplied schools with "thousands of tons of meat from old [chickens] that might otherwise go to compost or pet food," the newspaper reported.

In North Carolina, frozen meat from the USDA arrives by the truckload and is then distributed to school districts. There are no state-level quality checks unless the meat is obviously tainted, such as being thawed out.

"We follow the same plans the feds do. We store it just like the feds tell us to," said Gary Gay, an official with the N.C. Department of Agriculture who oversees food distribution for school lunches.

North Carolina ordered 4.8 million pounds of chicken, 1.8 million pounds of turkey, and 3.4 million pounds of beef from the USDA for the current school year, according to documentation provided by Gay.

A general rule of thumb is that 20 percent of school lunch food comes from the USDA, Gay said. School districts purchase the rest from private distributors such as U.S. Foods, Sysco, and Institution Food House.

Gay said that if he were a parent reading the *USA Today* article, "it would alarm me, raise some concerns, and make me ask some questions." He added, though, that school officials tell him that commodities from

the USDA are better than food from private distributors.

“We love commodities,” he said. “We never really have any bad complaints.”

In response to the food-safety revelations, U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack and members of Congress have pledged to step up efforts ensuring the quality of school lunch foods. Action on the issue could come this year as lawmakers are set to revise the Child Nutrition Act, the federal law that governs school meal subsidies.

An analysis released in August by the U.S. Government Accountability Office found that the federal government didn't always properly notify states about potentially tainted products provided through the commodities program. The GAO recommended that government agencies involved in the school-lunch process improve communication during recalls.

New York U.S. Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, a Democrat, has sponsored a bill that would improve the USDA's ability to halt the distribution of “suspect commodities and products” and streamline the food recall process. The bill was assigned to a committee in September but hasn't come up for consideration.

Both liberal and conservative critics have objected to the quality of school lunches and their impact on childhood obesity and diabetes rates. The potential for waste, abuse, and fraud in the program has also caught the attention of conservative reformers.

Sand said he was “amazed” at how few students actually ate all of their school lunches at his middle school in Los Angeles.

“When I was in a café, kids would have two bites of the food and then throw it out,” he said. “The amount of food wasted is mind-boggling.”

*David N. Bass is an associate editor of Carolina Journal.*