

Beef Blamed For E. Coli At Farm Party

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State health officials said Wednesday they have traced a massive E. coli outbreak to beef served at a Downstate Labor Day party, pointing to apparent undercooking and use of a private slaughterhouse as potential reasons the meat was tainted.

The announcement helps resolve a mystery that has confounded residents near the small town of Petersburg, where the party was held.

Yet the news brought only more anguish for farmer and party organizer Tom Baird, who has watched friends and family members suffer from the potentially deadly infection of E. coli O157:H7. The bacteria sickened 329 people who attended the party, indirectly infected others who did not attend the event, and left one man fighting for his life.

Officials said the infected beef came from a steer that had grazed on the same field where Baird held his annual party--though they found no sign of negligence on the part of the farmer himself.

Using DNA fingerprinting, technicians found genetically similar E. coli in droppings from cattle that had been in the field, in leftover meat from the party, and in infected people. "We can make the link from the cows in that pasture to the meat, and from the meat to the people who got sick," said John Lumpkin, director of the Illinois Department of Public Health.

Some of the estimated 1,500 partygoers may even have picked up bacteria from cow droppings or soil in the field. A statistical analysis of surveys from partygoers showed that people who sat on the ground during the show were more likely to get sick.

Public health officials said the steer was prepared at C A Processing of Athens, Ill., which slaughters meat for the private use of farmers. Although the state has sanitation standards for such facilities, inspectors are not present during slaughter and processing, as is the case at larger plants.

Health officials identified the slaughtering process as the point when the original contamination most likely occurred, though a recent inspection of the plant revealed no sign of unsanitary conditions.

Moreover, Lumpkin said, people who attended the party said some of the meat seemed to be undercooked.

"From the information we have, there were some cuts on this meat that were rare," Lumpkin said. He stressed that consumers of beef at such parties and elsewhere should be aware of the risks from rare meat.

Working alone in his farm field outside Petersburg on Wednesday afternoon, Baird said he had heard little about the conclusion announced by public health officials. He caught a quick snippet on the radio, but said he knew few details.

What he heard, he said, made him feel awful. He didn't want to believe that beef from one of his small herd could have hurt someone.

Baird, whose wife and mother were sickened in the outbreak, wavered between misery and doubt.

"I don't understand this," the 46-year-old Baird said.

The party, Baird's fourth annual "Cornstalk" musical bash, had been held on a small field beside Baird's clubhouse, where a stage was built. Baird said he took care to keep that field clear of manure, allowing cattle to graze there only two or three times a year to keep the grass short.

The last time any cows had been in the field was a month before the party, he said, though experts say bacteria can live outside cattle for several months. The steer that was eaten--presumably an infected animal--had not been in the field for a year, Baird said.

Although the contaminated meat came from Baird's cattle, investigators found nothing to suggest negligence on Baird's part, Lumpkin said.

"He followed all the applicable rules and regulations," Lumpkin said. No civil lawsuits had been filed in connection with Baird's party as of Wednesday.

In fact, investigators could not pin down the exact moment when the meat became contaminated--whether it was in the slaughterhouse, during transport to the party, or from food handlers.

Yet most such problems begin during the slaughtering process, Lumpkin said. Bacteria such as E. coli dwell in an animal's intestines and can contaminate meat easily if the intestines are punctured during slaughter, experts say.

The meat at Baird's party was sliced into 20-pound cuts and cooked over a spit for about 13 hours. If bacteria already were present on the meat's surface, they could have seeped through to the center of the beef during cooking, health officials said.

Officials with the Illinois Department of Agriculture inspected the slaughterhouse after the outbreak and found no sign of E. coli, a department spokesman said Wednesday. Representatives of C A Processing could not be reached for comment.

Charles "Joe" Wood, an 83-year-old who had been most seriously sickened in the outbreak, improved slightly to serious condition on Wednesday, a spokeswoman at Memorial Medical Center in Springfield said. His farm is next door to Baird's.

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