

Best Practices for Handling Vacuum- Packed Sub-Primal Beef Cuts

Developed By:
**American Meat Institute
National Meat Association
Southwest Meat Association**

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BACKGROUND

Vacuum-packed sub-primal beef cuts are the end product of beef fabrication operations. They are typically intact cuts of beef. They are produced from the various primal cuts of a beef carcass, are trimmed to a specification, then bagged, vacuum packaged, and boxed. Many vacuum-packed sub-primals have only one sub-primal per bag; others may have multiple sub-primals in a bag depending upon the size of the individual sub-primals. The same is true during boxing, with some boxes having only a single vacuum-packed sub-primal in the box (e.g., two-piece chucks), and others having more than one vacuum-packed sub-primal per box, depending upon the weight of the sub-primals. Most boxes of sub-primals weigh about 80 pounds, with this weight being the limiting factor for packaging multiple sub-primals per box. Most sub-primals are not produced to order; thus, at the time of production, the ultimate customer is unknown. Vacuum-packed sub-primals may be aged in the bag, and are used by food service and retailers to produce high-value steaks and roast cuts.

As steak cutters, retailers and processors further process vacuum-packed sub-primals to various oven-ready or case-ready products and they may separate and accumulate trimmings. Wholesalers, steak cutters, retailers and food service meat cutters become the *de facto* manufacturer and supplier of raw beef trimmings recovered from further processing of the sub-primal, and thus are responsible for HACCP and other regulatory requirements applicable to the production of raw beef trimmings derived from them and destined for raw ground beef products.

OBJECTIVE

These Best Practices recommend the optimum safe handling of the primary and potential secondary end products (e.g., edible and /inedible trimmings, fat) from vacuum-packed sub-primal beef cuts. Also, these Best Practices clarify the expectations relative to testing of vacuum-packed sub-primal beef cuts for pathogens.

BEST PRACTICES

Cold Chain Control

Cold chain management is a continuum from the time the beef carcass leaves the slaughter process and enters the chilling process to achieve a level at which foodborne pathogens do not grow. This level is 7°C; 44.6°F for *Salmonellae* and 7-8°C and 44.6-46.4°F. for pathogenic *E.*

coli. ** If cold chain control is violated at any point in the chain, product safety and quality may be compromised. Temperature control throughout the disassembly, storage, distribution, and further processing at all stages is extremely important. Under no circumstances should boxed sub-primal cuts be left in non-refrigerated cutting rooms, kitchens or unrefrigerated shipping or receiving docks for more than one hour.

Sanitation and Facilities

Production of vacuum-packaged sub-primal beef cuts must occur in facilities that meet all Federal regulations (9 CFR 307, 310, 313, 314, 317, 318, 320, and 416) and using equipment that meets sanitary operating standards, and is subjected to daily SSOPs.

HACCP System

Vacuum-packaged sub-primal beef cuts will be produced under FSIS or state inspection, thereby meeting all Federal and/or state (equal to) requirements pertaining to HACCP systems (9 CFR 417), Sanitation SOPs (9 CFR 416) and pre-requisite programs. Raw materials (i.e. carcasses) will be produced under a HACCP system such that at least one CCP is used to help reduce the likelihood of contamination by *E. coli* O157:H7. The raw material supplier must have successfully reassessed its HACCP plans within the past 12 months, or as required by FSIS policies, directives or notices.

Packaging

Vacuum packaging of sub-primal beef cuts must occur in a manner to minimize the likelihood of contamination from packaging equipment, the environment, or food contact surfaces. Verification of effective risk management measures must be done, e.g. routine microbiological audit sampling and testing to verify the efficacy of cleaning and sanitation, or specific verification testing conducted following equipment maintenance or relocation.

Sampling and Testing

Vacuum-packaged sub-primal beef cuts are produced and sold as whole muscle cuts with no ultimate knowledge of the end user. Since vacuum-packed sub-primal beef cuts are sold as whole muscle cuts, they are not sampled and tested for pathogens. Vacuum-packaged sub-primal beef cuts differ from similar sub-primal beef cuts that are sold in bulk containers such as combo bins for use in grinding.

**International Commission on Microbiological Specifications for Foods. 1996. Microorganisms in Foods: Microbiological Specifications of Food Pathogens. Blackie Academic & Professional, New York.

These Best Practices, developed with input from technical personnel at firms that produce vacuum-packed sub-primal beef cuts, are for the guidance of both firms that produce and firms that further process vacuum-packed sub-primal beef cuts. As additional intervention technologies become available, they will be reviewed and updated. Questions or suggestions are welcome and should be addressed to: Randy Huffman, American Meat Institute rhuffman@meatami.com ; Ken Mastracchio, National Meat Association ken@nmaonline.org and Joe Harris, Southwest Meat Association sma.jjh@tca.net .