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al lewis | columnist

Getting to the meat of labeling

By Al Lewis
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Is your beef really organic?

Is it natural? Grass-fed? Or hormone and antibiotic free?

Did it come from a cow that had been mutilated on a remote ranch by aliens?

Did it come from a cow that had been cloned by scientists?

You can't always trust the label. There is only one way to know for sure.

Patrick Cunningham, chief scientific adviser to the Irish government and professor of animal genetics at Dublin's Trinity College, is ready to give your cheeseburger a DNA test.

He was in Colorado last week checking out solar technology at the National Renewable Energy Lab in Golden. But he stopped by The Denver Post to tell me about IdentiGen, a privately held company he founded that can log a genetics profile of every animal run through a slaughterhouse.

"You don't need a label anymore," he said. "The label is in the meat."

Take apart a computer and you will find that every part has a number that can be traced back to a production date and manufacturing plant. If there's a bug, the computer maker can discover exactly where and when it started and solve the problem.

Meat producers try to do this too, because when there's a bug in the burger, they've got life-threatening problems on their hands.

Last year, meat producers had to yank more than 30 million pounds of ground beef from store shelves because of possible E. coli contamination. There were 20 recalls, versus eight in 2006. That included the second-largest beef recall in U.S. history (21.7 million pounds) and the demise of Topps Meat Co.

Tracking down tainted meat isn't as precise a task as meat producers would have consumers believe. That's why so much of it gets removed during a recall. Often, they can only narrow down the problem to lots of animals instead of individual animals.

A slaughterhouse, after all, is a plant that disassembles animals. In goes a cow at one end. Out comes vacuum-sealed steaks on the other. Somehow they track all these bloody parts in between.

"They claim to do it by having labels," Cunningham said. "They start with a label on a carcass, but by the time it gets to the retail end, the labels mean nothing."

The white-bearded professor took his research to market in 1996 during Great Britain's mad-cow scare. The European beef market had collapsed. Governments responded with regulations. "Cattle in Europe are better documented than humans," Cunningham said.

His system, which offered a free-market solution, took off.

"Other supermarkets may claim they have guaranteed 'traceability' on their beef," boasted Superquinn, a Dublin-based supermarket chain that first adopted IdentiGen's technology. "But they're talking bull."

Other European chains followed suit, including British-based grocery and merchandising company Tesco Plc.

Now, Dublin-based IdentiGen is talking to grocery chains and meat producers here. It has opened a U.S. headquarters in Lawrence, Kan., and is considering opening a sales office in Denver. "We hope to become the standard in the food industry," said Cunningham. "And we think we will be in the future."

Cunningham has learned over the years that meat is not always as advertised. One grocery chain he worked with learned that not all of its Angus was really Angus.

"When we stated to apply our system, we found out that the supplier was delivering about three times as much Angus to the retailer as they were actually buying from producers," Cunningham said.

A grocery customer once complained about finding a needle in his steak.

"We were able to trace it back to the farm and the veterinarian who broke that needle in the animal," Cunningham said.

The system isn't cheap. It raises beef by a couple of pennies a pound at the retail level. But that's not a lot considering what groceries are charging for premium cuts, said Donald Marvin, CEO of IdentiGen's North America operations.

"You know that organic beef that you're buying . . . and paying a big premium for? Well, maybe only 70 percent of that batch is organic," he said.

There's only one way to know. And Marvin believes American grocers and food producers will adopt this technology as a way of backing their claims.

He said the company expects a boost from a January decision by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration allowing cloned cattle into the food supply. This controversial decision is prompting many beef producers to consider "clone-free" labels.

But how will consumers know for sure? Doesn't a cloned burger taste exactly like the last one you ate? I mean, exactly?

"It forces full transparency on the supply chain," said Marvin. "DNA doesn't lie. It's irrefutable."

As for testing that cheeseburger, though, the system has limitations. That's because it likely contains meat from dozens, scores, hundreds or even a thousand different animals all ground together in a huge industrial plant.

Think about this next time you eat a burger. You get a different cow in every bite. One from Mildred. One from Sally. Another from Steve the steer. . . .

It's a busy undertaking to pinch them all out of the meat and test their DNA. "You can keep pulling, but you can never guarantee you'll get every last one that's there," Cunningham said.

Al Lewis' column appears Sundays, Tuesdays and Fridays. Respond to Lewis at blogs.denverpost.com/lewis, 303-954-1967 or alewis@denverpost.com.

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