

Beef row: new rules to protect shoppers

KELLY BURKE CONSUMER AFFAIRS

October 10, 2009

FEARS that as much as 30 per cent of the beef sold in Australia is old cow meat repackaged as prime produce has prompted the NSW Government to introduce rules to protect consumers.

Shoppers have little way of telling the true quality of the meat they are buying because there is no grading system for locally sold beef, nor any onus on retailers to inform their customers of the quality of a cut.

Locally sold meat is graded under Meat and Livestock Australia's voluntary MSA scheme, but only about 12,500 of the nation's 160,000 cattle properties are MSA-accredited.

Under the scheme animals aged 3½ years or older - including dairy cows too old for breeding - are classified by the industry as eight-tooth cows and considered only suitable for consumption as mince.

But under a Voluntary Beef Retail Agreement which has been operating for almost a decade, retailers are permitted to sell old cow meat as cuts such as rump, scotch fillet and T-bone as long as it is labelled "budget".

A Senate inquiry earlier this year criticised this practice, arguing that most consumers are not aware that the budget label is a euphemism for old cow meat and people are buying the product under the impression they are getting value for money.

One veteran meat grader told the *Herald* that some large retailers which were not signatories to the voluntary agreement operated "old meat days", where the eight-tooth meat is stacked on shelves on quiet days and marked "special", giving the consumer the impression they are getting a good cut as a one-off bargain.

The inquiry has urged that the states and the Commonwealth work together on a national meat grading system similar to the stringent AUS-MEAT standard, which grades all export beef.

The independent NSW MP Richard Torbay has introduced a private member's bill providing for such a system, which would be voluntary but underpinned by legislation. This would allow for large penalties against any signatory breaching truth-in-labelling rules.

"Federal governments have been held hostage by vested industry interests for years and have become bogged down in committees and navel gazing while the industry continues to suffer," he said.

Yesterday, the Primary Industries Minister, Ian Macdonald, indicated the NSW Government was preparing to take the first step and introduce AUS-MEAT accreditation for NSW abattoirs.

"I share consumers' concerns about truth in labelling when purchasing meat," he said. "The beef market is a national market and we would like to see a national approach that can be adopted by all states and territories."

While Woolworths has a policy of not buying any old cow meat, Coles operates under the "budget" provisions but denies allegations the practice is misleading as it adheres to the relevant standard.

"We are aware that some outlets use the word 'budget' as a descriptive term for some beef cuts, and it may not necessarily meet the standard," a Coles spokesman, Jim Cooper, said.

"We support stricter enforcement around the use of the word 'budget' so that it refers only to cuts meeting the standard."