FSA takes revised approach to shelf-life safety guidance for chilled fresh beef, lamb and pork following consultation

Shelf-life guidance for vacuum and modified atmosphere packed (VP/MAP) chilled fresh beef, lamb and pork has been updated by the FSA.

From now on, food business operators (FBOs) can choose a safe shelf-life for these specific products in line with their existing food safety management systems, in the same way they already do for other types of food. Moving away from a ‘one size fits all’ approach will benefit both consumers and industry and will continue to ensure high food safety standards and unnecessary food waste is reduced.

The decision has been taken based on a combination of evidence that includes expert microbiological advice, epidemiological information on the occurrence of botulism, and international data over many years on meat products. Implemented correctly, these new guidelines will have no negative impact on food safety.

Last month, a public consultation into options to change the previous 10-day maximum shelf-life best practice guidance for these products was concluded.

Rebecca Sudworth, FSA Director of Policy, said:

> “We can announce that our best practice guidance on the safety and shelf-life of VP/MAP chilled beef, lamb and pork is changing.
>
> “The UK has a robust legal framework and the food industry is responsible for ensuring food placed on the market is safe. Food businesses will be able to follow existing industry guidance to ensure that an appropriate shelf-life is applied to these products, while support will be provided to smaller businesses who may not have this capability by setting a modified 13-day limit.
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> “We are confident that food businesses throughout the UK will continue to put standards and safety at the heart of everything they do, so consumers can be confident their interests come first.”

Industry representatives on a joint FSA and industry working group, who have discussed the guidance over the past six months as part of the review process, welcomed the FSA’s decision.

David Lindars, Co-Chair of the working group and Technical Operations Director of the British Meat Processors Association (BMPA), said:

> “I welcome this decision, which represents modern evidence-based regulation, and has been reached thanks to excellent joined up working between industry and regulator.
>
> “We are confident that this is a proportionate outcome that will benefit consumers and food businesses and help reduce food waste, whilst not compromising food safety.”

This decision was reached in collaboration with Food Standards Scotland (FSS). The new guidance document will be available for reference on the FSA website from Monday 14 December 2020, but is effective immediately.

The FSA’s review of the best practice guidance, which aims to reduce the risk of foodborne botulism, found no evidence of outbreaks related to these products globally. This review included a report by an Advisory Committee on the Microbiological Safety of Food (ACMSF) subgroup.

While larger businesses are expected to be able to put into practice their own guidance immediately for these products, the FSA recognises that small and medium-sized food businesses may not have the suitable resources or expertise.

Therefore, they will be able to use the new ACMSF recommendation for their VP/MAP chilled fresh beef, lamb and pork, should they wish to do so. This means that they can apply a shelf-life of a maximum 13-day period for these products without further activity, to demonstrate the safety in relation to C. botulinum.

This review applies only to VP/MAP chilled fresh beef, lamb and pork without added ingredients or further processing beyond cutting, packing, chilling, freezing and quick-freezing. It does not apply to any beef, lamb or pork that is subject to further processing such as mincing, cooking or mixing with any other ingredients such as herbs, spices or curing salts.

The relevant sections of the FSA best practice guidance continue to apply to these and all other VP/MAP chilled foods.