

AMERICA, THE DYSTOPIAN REALITY SHOW: PINK SLIME EDITION

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When *The Decline and Fall of the American Empire* is written, I hope the historian writing it is astute enough to notice that the same week our nation's highest court spent deciding whether the government could legally offer (badly conceived) health insurance reform, the business community was fighting to sustain a market for pink slime.

Pink slime arose as a typically American response to industrialization. After Jack in the Box killed a bunch of its customers by feeding them *E. coli*, rather than cleaning up the nation's industrial meat supply, the food industry instead decided to scrub meat parts with ammonia before mixing it back in with The Beef.

But guess what? If you tell consumers what kind of slime you're actually feeding them, they'll stop eating it.

Ammoniated beef has taken a real beating in the media over the past couple years, and now fast-food giants McDonald's, Taco Bell and Burger King are no longer using it. As veteran journalist Philip Brasher reported over the holidays, the Iowa-based company that manufactures the beef product – at one time used in around 70 percent of American ground beef – has watched sales drop by 25 percent.

Beef Products Inc. uses an innovative process to turn fatty beef trimmings,

which used to go mainly into pet food and other byproducts, into hamburger filler. Because the trimmings are at risk for E. coli or Salmonella contamination, the company adds a mixture of ammonia and water (ammonium hydroxide) to kill bacteria. BPI's process, progressive food safety policies, and state-of-the art system have received numerous food safety awards and the company has never been linked to a foodborne illness.

But when some consumers find out about the treated beef product – dubbed “pink slime” by a U.S. Department of Agriculture microbiologist – they don't like what they hear and food companies are taking notice.

In 2008, many American eaters were introduced to the product by Food, Inc, the Oscar-nominated documentary, which portrayed the technology as merely masking a symptom of a bigger problem: the industrial meat system. A year later, a New York Times expose questioned whether the ammonium hydroxide process was really delivering on its food safety promise, which is especially critical considering the product is widely used in the National School Lunch Program.

After Krogers and McDonalds both decided they couldn't continue to sell consumers pink slime anymore, the pink slime company, BPI, shut down a bunch of pink slime factories.

Now a bunch of Governors and other industry-owned hacks have taken to the airwaves to defend pink slime.

Three governors, among them recent presidential candidate Rick Perry of Texas, two lieutenant governors, and the Under Secretary for Food Safety at the

U.S. Department of Agriculture all went to bat for Beef Products Inc. in a press conference in South Sioux City, Nebraska Thursday to assure consumers that Lean Finely Textured Beef, now widely known as "pink slime," is safe and nutritious.

[snip]

"We need to stand together to clear up the misinformation that has been circulating in the media," said Iowa Governor Terry Branstad, who helped organize the event. "These accusations are totally unfounded... I am proud to say that for 20 years I and my family have been eating it."

Kansas Governor Sam Brownback called the national controversy over LFTB "an unmerited and unwarranted food scare" and said it would lead to higher lean ground beef prices and cause more people to buy higher fat ground meat.

"Dude, it's beef!" said Brownback. "It's good beef."

All these high profile people could embrace an effort to clean up our industrial food supply. Alternately, they could inform consumers how much healthier they'd be if they gave up red meat altogether and instead ate chicken or—gasp!—broccoli.

But no. Instead, the very same week some of these same Governors argued that it was unduly coercive for the Federal Government to ask you to provide health care to the very poor **even while providing money for that care**, they're also trying to convince us that pink slime is the route to good health.

It's the little things, you know, that bring down great empires.