

Senate Has No Right to Keep Beef Off Tables

By Ferdie J. Deering
 Decreased consumption of red meat has been recommended by the Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs, headed by Sen. George McGovern, D-S.D.

This is not the first time that the 1972 presidential candidate has been observed chasing peculiar ideas. The committee recommended that people eat more poultry and fish, fruits, vegetables and grain products, less fats and sugar.

There is nothing particularly wrong with that diet, for those who prefer it, but the idea of having it prescribed for us by a Senate committee threatens our freedom of choice.

It might not be taken seriously, except that so many extreme proposals have resulted in laws and regulations affecting personal, business and community affairs which traditionally have been outside government rule in this free country.

Agri-Business

Somewhat similar diet suggestions have been made by federal

bureaus and agencies previously. With the power bureaus have to write their own regulations, attempts might be made to enforce such recommendations almost any time.

The drive of "liberal regulators" to impose food control ideas on the nation is abetted by health food faddists and by well-meaning people who mistakenly think we can prevent starvation in Africa or Asia by fasting in America.

Our national eating habits are changing rapidly enough under impact of such things as promotions of fast-food chains, pre-cooked foods in supermarkets and working housewives.

A recent prediction says Americans will spend about \$51 billion during out this year, up more than 12 per cent from the 1976 level.

A study made last year indicated 132 million persons (in a population of 214 million) eat away from home every day. It also reported that the No. 1 entree in the restaurant industry is fried chicken, with five beef cuts among the top 12 items.

Hamburgers and cheeseburgers were ranked at the top in the sandwich category, accounting for 56 per cent of sales in food service places. Steaks accounted for 16.5 per cent.

Estimates by meat packers say as much as 35 per cent of beef sold at retail is ground beef. This could be a favorable trend, providing outlets for less tender portions of beef carcasses. Hamburgers should never be tough.

Ground meat also is being fabricated into steak-like products molded under pressure frozen and then sliced.

Record food sales have been predicted for 1977, based upon a joint survey by the National Advertising Co. and National Restaurant Association. It was estimated that the total would run to \$80 billion, a gain of 11 per cent over 1975.

All of this is important to Oklahoma, because agriculture is our largest industry and most of our farm income is derived from sales of livestock and livestock products.

Wray Finney, Fort Cobb, president of the National Cattlemen's Association, said re-

cently that beef production is expected to decline as the cattle industry nears the end of a cyclical period of rapidly expanding beef output.

As beef supplies decreased on a per capita basis, Finney said we are apt to see some increase in average beef prices, compared to 1976, mainly in the last half of the year.

It is not known how much, but consideration Finney gave to the reduced meat-eating diet suggested by McGovern.

Finney has said higher cattle prices are expected.

"The only way the industry can recover its losses of the last three years and go on producing beef is to have an extended period where prices are well above operating costs," he said.

Cattlemen will tell you they have not yet arrived at that point. Some weeks ago, J. B. Smith, Osage County rancher, past president of the Oklahoma Cattlemen's Association and former officer of the national organization, told this writer:

"The consumer hasn't bought a pound of beef in the last five years that somebody hasn't lost money on."

In that statement, he included cow-calf producers, feeders, livestock dealers, packers, wholesalers and retailers. None has lost continuously, but each has

lost money at times.

The public in the past has been able to decide whether to eat beef or something else, without direction from a Senate committee, whose responsibility may be presumed to be primarily consideration of laws the country needs. Probably it still is.

If figures released in December by the Department of Commerce are correct, consumers can well afford to select whatever they prefer to eat. The report showed that personal income rose twice as fast as retail prices during 1975 and the first half of 1976.

It's time for Oklahoma cattlemen to get on the profit side of the ledger, and it doesn't help for public officials to try to steer customers away from the meat counter.