SOUTHWEST REGIONAL INFORMATION OFFICE

FOOD SAFETY AND QUALITY SERVICE

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
1100 Commerce Street • Room 5-C-40 • Dallas, Texas 75242
Telephone (214) 749-3331   Warlick

December 15, 1978

Space-Age Meat Inspection

Space-age technology is being used by the U.S. Department of Agriculture to help inspect meat that importers want to bring into the country.

It's a highly advanced computer system, developed by the department's Food Safety and Quality Service to help its inspectors examine the meat products faster and more efficiently.

"The system has been in operation since October," said Jesse Oliver of the service's Philadelphia office, who explained how the "Import Information System" (ISS) works.
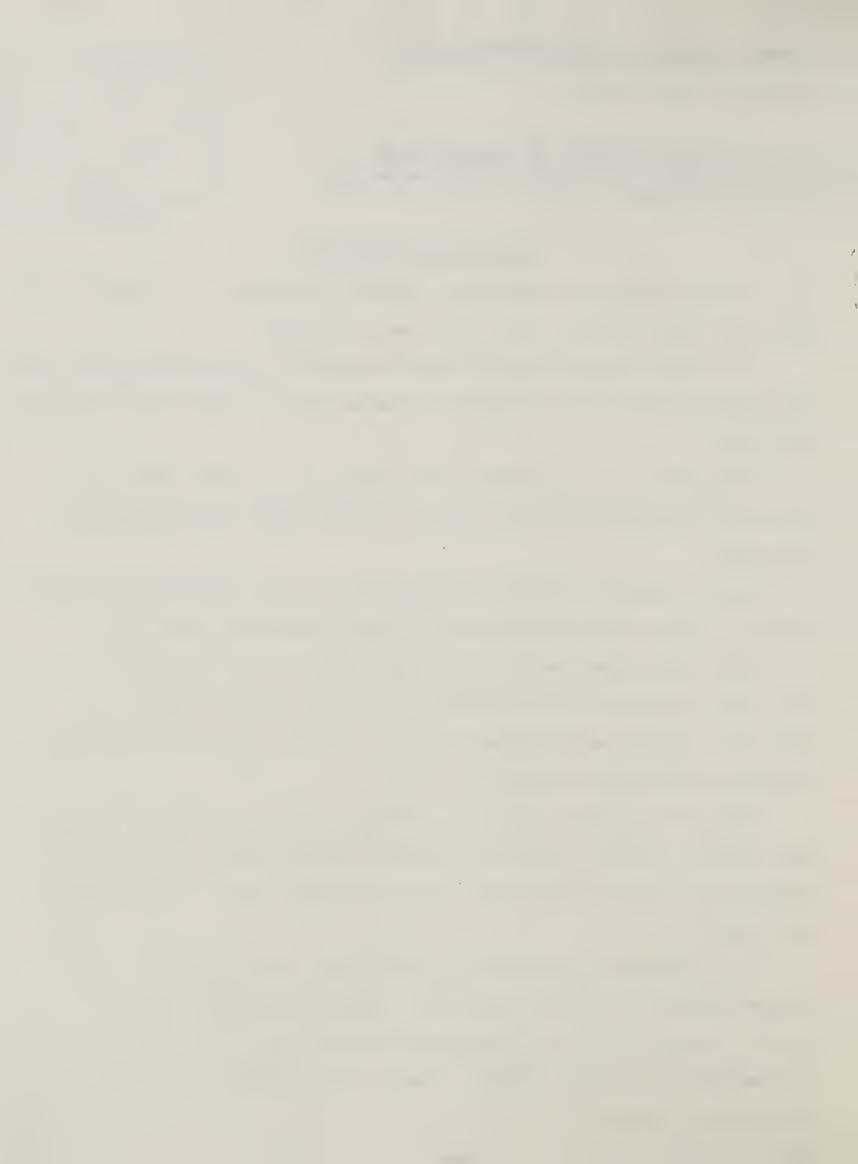
There are computer terminals at 12 major ports of entry, including New Orleans. They tie in with a central computer at the service's Hyattsville, Md., office.

"When a meat shipment arrives from abroad," Oliver said, "an examiner at the port enters information from the importer's application into the system. The Hyattsville computer checks its memory bank to classify the product and determine the foreign establishment's compliance record.

"Based on the product's history, the computer prints out assignments for the meat inspector to follow. These tell him what inspection procedures, tests, and sampling are necessary to assure that the meat or poultry product is wholesome and safe to eat."

"The IIS does not eliminate personal inspection," explained Oliver. "The computer helps the inspector at the port by giving him a scientific sampling pattern to follow so that his examination will enable him to truly judge the acceptablility of the entire shipment. Overall, the IIS means tighter control of imported meat products."

FSQS-73   -more-

Space-Age Meat Inspection

Oliver said when the Food Safety and Quality Service inspector completes his tests, he enters the results into the computer system, thus updating the product history for future reference by any of the other ports of entry in the system. In this way, the system forms a nationwide network. About 7 percent of this country's meat supply is imported.

Oliver gave a recent example of how the system works. "One of the service's inspectors stopped a meat shipment into the Philadelphia port of entry on the basis of the computer printout. The importer dedmanded to know why his shipment was being delayed.

"We told him the computer had alerted us that his product came from a foreign plant with a poor record of complying to our food import regulations. This information was based on shipments that came into the port of New York on earlier occasions.

"The computer said we should take a greater number of samples than usual. So the inspection took us a little longer than normal. In this case, the suspect meat checked out O.K., but you can see that the computer saved us from what could have been serious trouble."

Previously, each port of entry kept its own records on foreign products. This meant that if the exporter was new to that port, inspectors would have to make an independent determination as to the required examination, tests and number of samples.

Development of the Import Information System was started in 1973. This year, the service installed computer terminals in New Orleans, Philadelphia, Boston, New York, Norfolk, Charleston, Miami, San Juan, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Seattle.

FSQS-73   -30-