

from our viewpoint...

Governors show loyalty to beef sector

A high-powered delegation of Midwestern governors gathered in South Sioux City, Neb., last week to try to save some jobs and buck up the price of beef.

While their hearts may have been in the right place, we think the governors are wasting their time, and their taxpayers' money.

No matter what they say, even if the governors did eat hamburgers made with the stuff, consumers are just not going to embrace an ingredient called "pink slime."

This stuff is nothing you wouldn't expect in your average hot dog. It's beef scraps that have been ground, had the fat cooked out at low temperature, and made ready to add to ground beef and other foods.

One objection to the product, known in the industry as "lean, finely textured beef," from left-wing groups had been that it's treated with ammonia to kill bacteria. There's no showing that the ammonia is harmful, but it is a harsh chemical.

If you had to choose between bad bacteria and ammonia treatment, though, which would you prefer? The stuff won't hurt you. Whether it makes for a fresh, wholesome and tasty burger is quite another thing.

But somehow, the opposition got a hold of that name "pink slime," and the manufacturer, Beef Products Inc., has had to shut all but one of its plants. That one, in South Sioux City, is on life support.

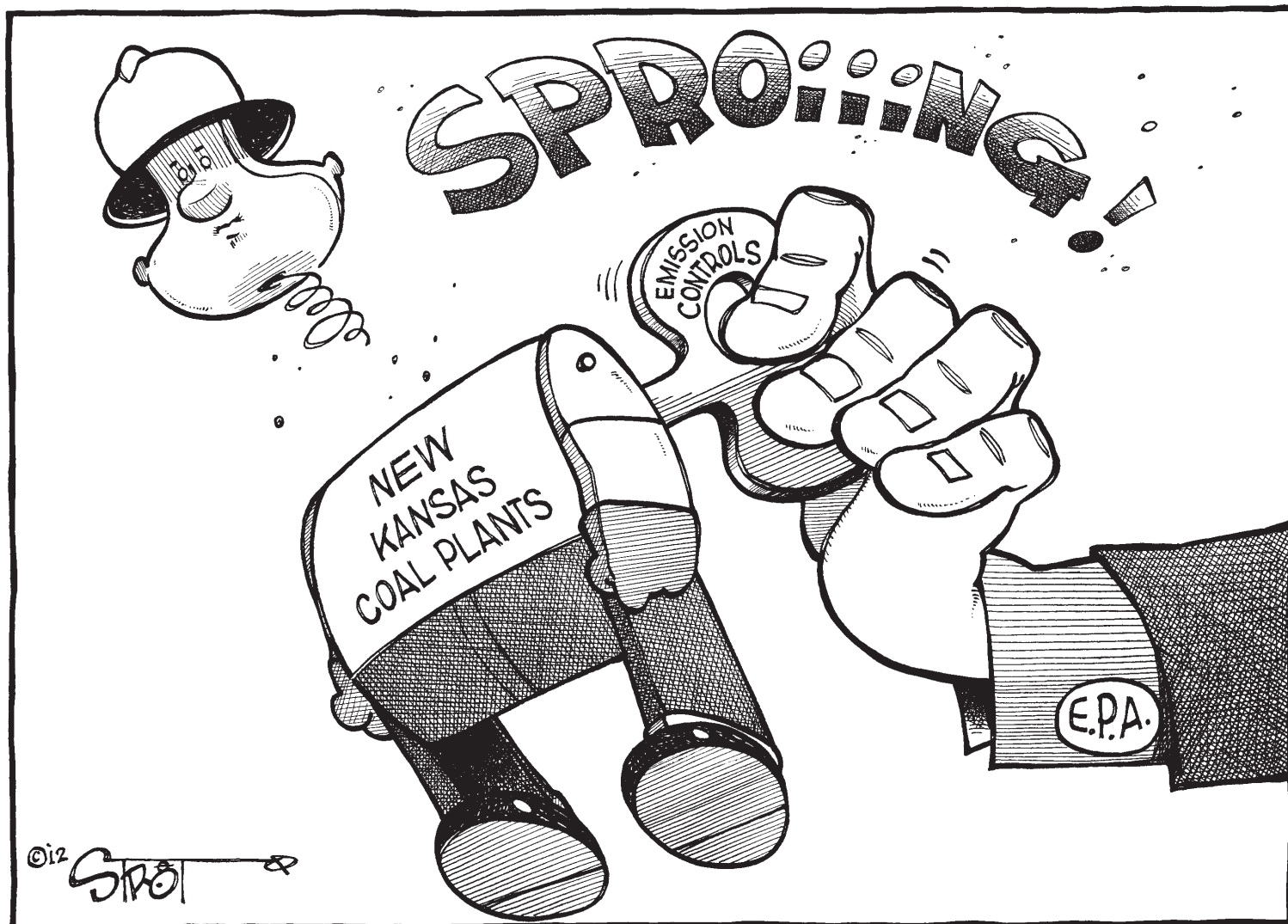
So there were the governors, munching on pink-slime infused burgers and making a show of how safe and tasty they were. It's a high-powered group, including two former conservative presidential candidates, our own Sam Brownback and Rick Perry of Texas. Others were Lt. Gov. Matt Michels of South Dakota, standing in for his governor, who was out of the country on a trade mission; Nebraska's Dave Heineman; and Terry Branstad of Iowa.

They put on a good show. They showed fealty to both the beef industry and to the cause of scarce jobs in their states. But we can't say they won many consumers over.

Though this type of processed beef has been on the market for 20 years without a fuss, the current scare likely has killed it for a while. Some will continue to eat it, but most supermarket chains and fast-food outlets dropped it like a hot rock.

And why not, when people will be demanding "real" beef. Many of us might prefer store-ground beef with a better texture and maybe even some flavor, of course. Many restaurants serve that, and most stores sell it. But patties made with this processed stuff can be cheaper and hold together better. Some may prefer them.

Regardless, it'll be a few years before the market for pink - er, lean, finely textured beef - returns to normal. Simply put, the damage has been done. - Steve Haynes



Reform KPERS now for the future

The Kansas Public Employee Retirement System has been a major topic of discussion for the last several years. As your state treasurer, I am a member of the retirement system board, which has a fiduciary responsibility to manage the assets for the benefits of the members, and not to make positions on the legal structure. But as state treasurer (and a Tier 1 retirement system member), I encourage the legislature and the governor to pass some necessary changes this year.

The retirement system is a valuable benefit for state employees, local school employees, and most local government employees. It serves over 260,000 active and inactive members and retirees. As you have heard, it is projected to be \$8.3 billion short in paying promised benefits to all current employees and retirees. But let me reassure you that the system has \$13.5 billion in assets (approximately 62 percent of what is needed) today - enough to pay benefits for all current retirees and most employees that will retire in the next 10-15 years. Kansas Public Employees Retirement needs a solution that addresses two critical issues: it makes the system solvent for all current employees and it provides a stable plan for all future employees.

If we don't take action now, we are at risk of having our bond rating lowered and the system will consume even more of our state budget at the expense of other vital state services to Kansans in the future.

Several things have caused our retirement system to get in this condition, but the primary reason is the Legislature was given some bad



Ron Estes

• state treasurer

advice in 1993. They were told the benefits could be raised and the contributions held low for the employers and the employees (at 4 percent of salary). By the late 1990's the Legislature saw contribution levels were not high enough, and began to raise them. In order to not impact the state and local budgets too harshly they limited the annual increases. Finally, in 2009 they were forced to raise the employee contributions and created the Tier 2 level.

Even though the system's investments have achieved the 8 percent investment rate of return over the last 30 years, these changes have not been enough to adequately fund the plan.

I have followed the process in the legislature and the Study Commission very closely and provided input as the process has moved forward. Recently, the House of Representatives passed a bill that addresses these critical issues. House Substitute for Senate Bill 259 increases the contribution amount for the state and local government employees. It also sets requirements for Tier 1 and Tier 2 employees to be equal. Tier 1 employees will contribute at a 6 percent rate in exchange for an increase in benefits to 1.85 percent times each year worked. Tier 2 employees will continue to contribute 6 percent and will receive an increase in benefits to 1.85 percent times each

year worked in exchange for the cost of living adjustment.

In addition, the bill creates a Tier 3 for new employees hired after 2014. These new employees would have a choice to pick a Defined Contribution (DC) Option similar to a 401(k) in private industry or a Cash Balance Option. The DC Option would allow employees to contribute 6 percent to their own account and make their own investment decisions. In today's world it is imperative that we give state employees the freedom and flexibility to control their retirement future.

In the Cash Balance Option, an employee contributes 6 percent and the employer adds up to 4 percent. The employee is guaranteed a 5 percent return as their benefit. This is an option for employees who plan a long term career with a state or local government employer.

I encourage the Legislature to pass and the Governor to sign a bill like 259. It is not the exact solution I would have preferred and I expect further changes as this process moves forward, but it provides choices for future employees and continues benefits promised to existing employees. It addresses both critical issues by not digging the hole any deeper for future employees, empowers those employees who wish to take control of their own retirement by giving them the flexibility to do so, and begins to close the existing funding gap.

Significant structural KPERS reform must happen this year. Our state cannot afford to put this off yet again.

Trades make baseball interesting

Ted stopped by and shared the news. I never thought I would care about, let alone feel sorry for, the Milwaukee Brewers baseball team. But it seems another generation of kids, young and old, had been disillusioned.

I had flashbacks to my worst moments as a Royals' fan - the trade of hometown boy and reigning Cy Young Award winner David Cone to the Yankees, the Johnny Damon trade, the Carlos Beltran trade, etc., etc.

Oh, I almost forgot, Ted's news: The Brewers' star player, first baseman Prince Fielder, left his team and signed a \$215 million contract with the Detroit Tigers. To add insult to injury, the Tigers play in the same division as the Royals.

Ted can understand. He's a lifelong Cardinals fan. Earlier this off-season, their best player, Albert Pujols, possibly the best hitter of his generation, left the only team he had ever played for and headed to southern California for a semi-load of dollar bills.

Pujols' move came on the heels of another improbable World Series title. How does a star player turn his back on his fans after winning the World Series?

St. Louis is a so-called mid-market team. So now Cardinals' fans can relate to the small-market Royals as they watch their best player head off for a bigger paycheck elsewhere.

Pujols' wife was quoted in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* as saying that she and her husband felt "disrespected" by the Cardinals' five-year, \$135 million offer. Maybe that absurd comment will make it easier for fans to say goodbye.

People almost always root for the team with whom he or she grew up. Ted grew up in Illinois near St. Louis with the likes of Stan Musial, Lou Brock and Bob Gibson as heroes. I even have a good friend here who roots for the Yankees.

How can anyone root for the Yankees? It turns out he grew up near New York, rooting for the Bronx Bombers. I understand. Other than that, he's a great guy.



a voice of reason

• alan jilka

I grew up with George Brett, Frank White and the Royals during their glory days. I'll stick with them no matter what.

But the Royals' long postseason drought has been particularly painful. The turning point came when Cone was traded away immediately after the 1994-95 baseball strike. Ever since, then the team has languished in or near the cellar.

To add insult to injury, Royals' fans have had to watch their one-time starting outfielder - Johnny Damon, Carlos Beltran and Jermaine Dye, all play in World Series for other teams. Damon and Beltran both came up through the Royals' farm system.

So what do Prince Fielder and Albert Pujols say to the kids of all ages who spent years idolizing their every move, the fan base that was the foundation of all their fame and riches? What do Brewers and Cardinals fans do with their

old baseball cards?

I know, I'm caught up in nostalgia for a world that doesn't exist anymore. I still vividly remember when the pre-Pujols California Angels won the World Series several years ago and one of their fans held up a sign in the stands that proclaimed his team to be "Fourteenth in Payroll, First in Heart." They'll have to discard that.

Maybe we need to bust the baseball players' union. After all, baseball is the only major professional sport without a solid revenue sharing program. But, now that I think of it, players switch the color of their jerseys in other sports, too.

There is a bright side to all of this melancholy musing. Spring training is here. When the season starts, all of the small-market teams will be 0-0, like everyone else. And this year, the Royals might have a team. Seriously!

Not only that, all their star players are several years away from free agency. We have a window of opportunity. Let me tell you about several of their prospects.

Oops, I'm out of space. Hopefully there are tickets left for Opening Day.

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