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DEC to hold workshops on commercial cheese production

Informational meetings set for Delta, Fairbanks and Wasilla

The Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) will host special workshops next week to answer questions and provide information on proposed regulations covering the safe manufacture of commercial cheese.

Representatives from DEC will participate in the public workshops from 4:30 to 7 p.m. Meetings are scheduled for Delta Junction on June 22 at the Jarvis Office Center, for Fairbanks on June 23 at the DEC office, 610 University Avenue; and in Wasilla on June 24 at the DEC office, 1700 E. Bogard Rd.

Since 2008 there has been an increase in small companies making cheese in the state. Alaska is the only state in the nation without regulations to ensure cheese made for sale to the public does not present a health risk. "We are excited to see more entrepreneurs venturing into cheese making and offering an Alaskan product to the public. Our goal is to ensure they make products that are safe to eat," says Kristin Ryan, director of DEC's Environmental Health division.

Before drafting its regulations, DEC reviewed many states' rules on cheese making, particularly those with established artisan cheese industries including Massachusetts, Vermont, Maine and Oregon. "Regulations ensuring food safety are part of the industry's success in those states," says Ryan.

The proposed regulations establish the minimum standards necessary to make cheese that consumers can eat without facing health risks. They address sanitary processing facilities and techniques to kill bacteria and pathogens that may contaminate milk. They also specify tests to make sure protective measures are successful and the food is safe to eat.

The workshops will go into detail about these requirements, and discuss ways to meet them. Recent food borne disease outbreaks associated with dairy products in the US illustrate the reason why all states have these requirements. Presenters will provide examples of how small operations can make safe cheese.

For those who cannot attend in person, a telephone call-in is available at: Meet Me Line: (800) 315-6338 Pass Code X8213.

Public comments will not be taken during the workshops.