Stillwater, Okla. – Oct. 30, 2015

The World Health Organization’s International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) released this week the results of its evaluation of the carcinogenicity of consumption of both red meat and processed meats. The study classified processed meat as “carcinogenic to humans” and red meat as “probably carcinogenic to humans.”

Jake Nelson, value-added meat processing specialist for Oklahoma State University’s Robert M. Kerr Food & Agricultural Products Center, said he found this news surprising.

“From what I have read, the IARC came to this conclusion by reviewing existing research on meat and cancer to determine potential causes and to evaluate the carcinogenicity of specific substances,” he said.

The Beef Checkoff submitted six scientific studies to the IARC for review, and the IARC committee of 22 experts reviewed more than 800 studies from several countries about meat and cancer. The evidence was divided on their opinion whether to label red meat a “probable” cause of cancer. Unable to reach a consensus agreement, they settled for a “majority” agreement.

“A majority vote of opinions hardly constitutes scientific research results,” said Kyle Flynn, FAPC meat processing pilot plant manager. “There has been a whole lot of research on cancer causes, but I am unaware of any that single out any particular foods.”

Shalene McNeill, a nutrition scientist and registered dietitian with Beef Checkoff, attended the IARC meeting in Lyon, France. She said most scientists agree that it is unrealistic to isolate a single food as a cause of cancer from a complex dietary pattern further confounded by lifestyle and environmental factors.

In the article, “Science Does Not Support International Agency Opinion on Red Meat and Cancer” at factsaboutbeef.com, Dominik Alexander, an epidemiologist who has conducted research on behalf of the Beef Checkoff, said there are many factors associated with the probability of getting cancer, which include age, genetics, socioeconomic characteristics, obesity, lack of physical activity, where one is raised, alcohol consumption, smoking and even one’s profession. Epidemiologic science on red meat consumption and cancer is best described as weak associations and an evidence base that has weakened over time. He also added because red meat is consumed in the context of hundreds of other foods and is correlated with other behavioral factors, it is not valid to conclude red meat is an independent cause of cancer.

Despite the IARC’s conclusions, FAPC, a part of OSU’s Division of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources, helps to discover, develop, and deliver technical and business information that will stimulate and support the growth of value-added food and agricultural products and processing in Oklahoma. This includes support of the harvesting and further processing of livestock, as well as providing assistance to the processed meats industry.