

Trend Toward Case-Ready Fresh Meats Grows Worldwide

DENVER, CO — Prepackaged fresh meat delivered to retailers and ready for immediate placement in the meat case will be commonplace in the United States and European retail outlets within a few years. However, don't expect the U.S. to follow Europe's lead by using the same method of case-ready packaging. There are just too many differences between American and European consumer buying habits and retail meat delivery systems.

That is the message Jim Bruce, group director for lamb marketing with the American Sheep Producers Council, delivered recently at CAP '87 in Chicago. Bruce, a leading authority on fresh meat packaging, was formerly international market development manager for Cryovac, the packaging and equipment division of W. R. Grace Company.

CAP '87 was the Third International Conference on Controlled and Modified Atmosphere Vacuum Packaging, where discussions focused on the latest packaging technology and innovations for a variety of food products, including fresh meat.

Bruce described some of the differences between American and European consumer buying habits and meat distribution systems which affect packaging decisions. For example, European consumers shop daily, buy meat in small quantities and rarely freeze meat. Since shipping distances from central packaging sites to retailers are shorter, European meat products have minimal shelf-life requirements and shipping costs are low.

In comparison, meat in the U.S. is distributed nationwide which means packaging must be as economical and conservative as possible to keep down costs. Since shipping distances to the retailer may be extensive, longer product shelf life is important. About 75 percent of all fresh meat is frozen by U.S. consumers before use which adds requirements for greater packaging protection.

Product characteristics, including the type of packaging to a great extent, appear to be driven by the motives of the organization introducing the concept. In Europe central prepackaging is done by retailers, while in the U.S. packers and processors are taking the lead.

Europe's case-ready packaging choice, Controlled Atmosphere Packaging (CAP), is a method of sealing fresh meat products in airtight plastic containers under controlled temperatures. The containers are usually rectangular and air is replaced by gas before sealing. Generally, this is 50 percent oxygen to retain the bright red color, 20 percent carbon dioxide to inhibit spoilage and the remaining 30 percent comprised of oxygen, nitrogen or carbon dioxide. With CAP, meat maintains a natural bright red color and has a maximum shelf life of about six days. The CAP process requires a package twice as large as the product to allow sufficient head space for the gas. Meat packed in this method does not freeze well.

Bruce says the CAP system is now the undisputed leader in Europe's drive to central prepackaging of fresh meat. CAP use in some European countries is growing rapidly and ranges as high as 40% of fresh meat sales. In Great Britain, for example, CAP packaging has risen from 10 to 23 percent of total retail meat packaging in the past 24 months.

The primary alternative to CAP is a vacuum-packaging method

which uses an oxygen-impermeable bag or pouch. Air is removed from the package and the wrap hugs tightly around the meat. Vacuum packaging is the prominent system used in the U.S.

The airtight atmosphere created by vacuum packaging gives red meat products a purplish hue which returns to a natural red when the package is opened and the meat is exposed to oxygen. Vacuum packaging requires less display space, results in less packaging bulk which lowers shipping costs, and provides a shelf life of up to 21 days and freezer protection — advantages for American distributors, retailers and consumers.

CAP has one major advantage for both European and U.S. markets; it maintains the color of meat in the cherry red hue that consum-

ers associate with freshness. However, CAP translates to twice the bulk, twice as many trucks and twice as much cardboard for master packaging of CAP than vacuum packaged primals or retail cuts. For regional distribution up to 200 miles CAP may prove acceptable but for national distribution it is a major cost disadvantage.

The ultimate conclusion as to which central prepackaging form, or forms are successful in the U.S. market will clearly be influenced by who is launching the program introduction. If central prepackaging continues to be driven by major U.S. meat packers then vacuum packaging appears to be the most likely choice, Bruce says.

"It is now generally accepted in both meat and supermarket industries that centrally-prepacked,

branded meat will become common during the next ten years," Bruce said. "This concept offers tremendous new opportunities for red meat sales in America, in general, and particularly for American lamb which is currently unavailable in many markets because of limited distribution."


The American Sheep Producers Council is currently participating in projects with major lamb pack-

ers and processors that are developing and distributing their own case-ready and tray-ready Fresh American Lamb products. "With the increased availability of case-ready lamb any retailer in the nation may soon be able to order the type of prepackaged cuts that they want to meet store and consumer needs, including guaranteed shelf-life and consistent quality."

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SEMINAR SCHEDULE

(Lunch or Dinner Will be Served)

DATE	AREA	PLACE	TIME
January 19, 1988	Rhodesdale, Md./Denton, Md.	Hurlock Fire Hall, Hurlock, Md.	6:00 P.M.
January 20, 1988	Oxford, Pa.	Post House Restaurant, Oxford, Pa.	10:00 A.M.
January 22, 1988	Quarryville, Pa.	Hoffman Building, Quarryville, Pa. Solanco Fair Grounds	10:00 A.M.
January 25, 1988	Dagsboro, De./Pittsville, Md.	Gumboro Fire Hall, Gumboro, De.	10:00 A.M.
January 26, 1988	Cordova, Md./Wye Mills, Md.	Bay Country Moose, Grasonville, Md.	6:30 P.M.
January 27, 1988	Trappe, Md./Cambridge, Md.	Econo Lodge, Cambridge, Md.	10:00 A.M.
January 27, 1988	Greensboro, Md.	American Legion Hall, Denton, Md.	6:00 P.M.
January 28, 1988	Sudlersville, Md./Kennedyville, Md.	American Legion Hall, Chestertown, Md.	10:00 A.M.
February 2, 1988	Fawn Grove, Pa./Stewartstown, Pa.	Taylor House, Stewartstown, Pa.	10:00 A.M.
February 3, 1988	Brogue, Pa.	Rutter's Restaurant, Red Lion, Pa.	10:00 A.M.
February 3, 1988	Churchville, Md.	Sheraton Inn, Aberdeen, Md.	7:00 P.M.
February 4, 1988	Middletown, De./Clayton, De.	Townsend Fire Hall, Townsend, De.	10:00 A.M.
February 8, 1988	Daretown, NJ	Grange Hall, Elmer, NJ	10:00 A.M.
February 8, 1988	Swedesboro, NJ	Dutch Inn, Swedesboro, NJ	4:00 P.M.
February 9, 1988	Vincentown, NJ	Holiday Inn, Bordentown, NJ	10:00 A.M.
February 11, 1988	Milford, De./Harrington, De.	Carlisle Fire Hall, Milford, De.	10:00 A.M.

*Invitation with Sweepstakes/Door Prize entry card will be mailed approximately two weeks prior to each meeting. If you do not receive an invitation and would like to attend a meeting, or if it is inconvenient to attend the meeting in your area, call the Milford, Delaware office at 1-800-441-2367 (Outside Delaware), or 302-422-3001.

Must be Present to win Door Prize or \$500.00 Cash Sweepstakes.

