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 From Dairy and Animal Science at Penn State

**MEAT INSPECTION  
 — CHANGE  
 IS COMING**

**William R. Henning**  
 Associate Professor  
 Animal Science

In February 1992, Russell Cross took over as administrator of USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS), which is responsible for meat and poultry inspection. The outlook was bright for positive change as Cross, former professor of meat science at Texas A&M University, laid plans to update meat and poultry inspection, assess the microbial and chemical condition of meat and poultry at all stages of production, and improve a system that was already one of the best in the world.

Optimism waned suddenly earlier this year with illness and deaths of several people from infection with E. coli O157:H7 — partly traced to ground beef undercooked in a fast-food restaurant. Not only have many Americans changed the way they view the inspection and consumption of meat, but consumer activists and politicians have blasted the system.

New regulations and rules already have resulted from these outbreaks, and talk abounds on the need for even more radical changes. The issue has put a great

deal of pressure on the inspection system as well as meat packers and processors across the country.

Current regulations, established under the 1968 Wholesome Meat Act, are specific and strict. Meat inspectors have the authority to halt meat processing any time they believe that facilities or equipment are unsanitary or a product is unsafe. More than two-thirds of USDA's 7,500 inspectors work in slaughter plants where they visually inspect every animal live, and again during slaughter. Any sign of abnormality results in the carcass being condemned (taken out of the human food chain) or retained until laboratory tests prove it is safe.

USDA is trying to move away from visual inspection alone, but they need scientific data to indicate potential problems. Science-based support groups such as chemists and microbiologists within FSIS have increased in number, activity, and sophistication of procedures. Bacterial and residues data have increased as more FSIS laboratories have been equipped with state-of-the-art equipment.

**Consumer Expectations**

What do consumers really want? Obviously, a safe food supply that doesn't threaten human health. Some consumer groups, however, are calling for meat and poultry products that are pasteurized or even sterile. They seem to



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want a "magic bullet" against bacterial contamination.

The industry is appraising the effectiveness of new technology. Mild organic rinses, such as citric acid (as in vinegar), have been approved. But these are only partly effective. Alkaline washes (such as trisodium phosphate) are effective against salmonella. They are approved and widely used in poultry plants.

Procedures such as these will reduce the number of bacteria present, but the numbers of true pathogens (such as E. coli O157:H7) required to cause serious illness in humans is so low that rinses are not always effective against them.

Sampling for bacteria at the plant level is impractical; it takes too long to test the meat before it is shipped or mixed with trimmings from other carcasses.

Further, while testing each piece of meat is impractical, a sample from one part of the carcass may not indicate contamination elsewhere. Also, in many cases, the product becomes contaminated by

humans or equipment in later stages of processing or preparation.

Aside from proper cooking, the only effective way to completely assure freedom from contamination is irradiation. Scientists and health officials have declared irradiation to be effective and safe, but consumer activists continue to raise questions.

**Major New Programs**

- The Nutrition Labeling and Education Act (NLEA). Although this program was forced on USDA by FDA, companies are going full speed ahead preparing nutrition labels for the July 6, 1994 implementation date. Many are skeptical about whether consumers will read or understand this information.

- The Safe-Handling Label. Just as most processors thought they were ahead of the labeling game, another bomb was dropped in late August requiring safe-handling labels on all fresh meat and poultry. Retailers were miffed at such short notice and have postponed the process though a legal challenge. USDA will start the entire procedure again and should be able to respond to comments and implement the program early in 1994.

- The Zero-Tolerance Program

was implemented only after the serious E. coli outbreaks and before much of the beef microbial survey research was completed. FSIS really didn't know what, if any, problems existed. In many ways, this program lends us a false sense of security. Even if we remove every speck of foreign material from the carcass, we haven't necessarily removed all the bacteria.

- HACCP (Hazard Analysis, Critical Control Point) highlights process controls as means to ensure a safe product. It makes sense scientifically, and many plants already are implementing it.

- Microbial standards. Many are calling for microbial standards but opinions vary widely. What causes illness in one person may not in another. Consumers in this country will not allow the meat industry to set a standard for the amount of pathogenic bacteria present in a food — there is zero tolerance. There are many technical problems in implementing such a program.

Change is inevitable. It is coming rapidly within FSIS and, for the most part, looks promising for the consumer. We have a good inspection system, but it will be better.

## Agway Reports Profitable Year

SYRACUSE, N.Y. — Charles F. Saul, Agway president and CEO, reported the Syracuse-based farm supply cooperative returned to profitability in the first full year of its three-year reengineering program called Customer Driven: 1995.

Agway reported year-end profits of \$19.75 million on sales and revenues of \$1.7 billion for the 1993 fiscal year that ended June 30. This compares with a fiscal 1992 loss of \$58.8 million which includes a \$75 million restructuring charge against restated consolidated sales and revenues of \$1.8 billion.

"The ability of our employees to deliver superior customer service while being very competitive in the feed and crop needs businesses is already producing positive results", said Saul. "Each of our five basic businesses including agriculture, consumer retailing energy, agricultural leasing, and insurance had profitable operations during the past year."

Saul explained that two subsidiaries, publicly traded Curtice Burns Foods and wholly-owned H.P. Hood, were reported as discontinued operations pending their expected sales during the 1993-1994 fiscal year. Agway announced in March that it was exploring the possibility of selling its approximately 34-percent stake in Curtice Burns and had previously announced plans to sell Hood. Consolidated sales reported in 1992 of \$3.2 billion included Curtice Burns and Hood. Agway's 1993 final net margin of \$19.75 million includes a net loss of less than \$6 million from the two food subsidiaries.

Saul also announced changes in this year's annual meeting dates. Traditionally, the cooperative meeting was held at the end of October in Syracuse, recently at the New York State Fairgrounds. This year, three one-day meetings will be held starting December 1 at the Sheraton in Liverpool, N.Y. Other meetings will be held December 6 at the Springfield, Mass., and December 9 at the Hershey Lodge and Convention Center, Hershey, Pa.

Six incumbent directors, nominated earlier in the year, are expected to be officially elected to three-year terms at the Syracuse meeting. They include Peter D. Hanks of Salem, N.Y.; Robert L. Marshman, Oxford, N.Y.; Samuel F. Minor, Washington Pa; Donald E. Pease, Susquehanna, Pa; Carl D. Smith, Corinna, Maine; and Joel L. Wenger, Greencastle, Pa.

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