

Meat: Is It As Safe As Can Be?

CHICAGO, Ill. — While it sounds comprehensive, zero tolerance of contaminations on meat carcasses probably isn't the best answer to making meat safer. That was the word from a panel discussion at the 47th Annual Reciprocal Meat Conference (RMC) last month.

The RMC, hosted by Pennsylvania State University, was sponsored by the American Meat Science Association in cooperation with the National Live Stock and Meat Board. Safety experts from academia, foodservice, perharvest production, and regulatory agencies met in University Park, last month.

In a session on food safety and muscle foods inspection, speakers concluded that an industry-wide total quality management program would be more efficient than the 1993 federal zero tolerance regulation that requires removal of all contaminants, regardless of size, from the carcass.

"As we have attempted to monitor the pathogen count, zero tolerance isn't working as well as we would like for it to work, and in fact we aren't reducing the pathogen content," said panel discussion leader Gary Smith, professor of meat science at Colorado State University.

Advanced methods of removing contaminants, such as the

Meat Board-funded carcass studies being conducted at plants throughout the country, are demonstrating success in practical applications. But even if zero pathogens existed on the outside of carcasses, several of the panelists said that pathogens could still exist.

"Essentially, if you're testing to keep (pathogens) out of the system, it's going to eventually come back and bite you," said William Sischo, assistant professor of veterinary science at Pennsylvania State University. "No matter how thorough your test, something will eventually work its way through."

Instead of massive testing, Sischo and Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) assistant administrator Richard Carnevale suggested extending Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points (HACCP) programs to the farms, monitoring and quarantining livestock before they end up at the packing plant.

A method of total quality management, HACCP originally emphasized monitoring production in processor, plants. Extending HACCP to the farms, ranches and feeding sites would increase quality at every subsequent point in meat production, Sischo said.

"We're after pathogen reduction, not pathogen elimination," Carnevale said. "The idea of im-

plementing HACCP on the farm is just that. It's just trying to identify practices that decrease the possibility of pathogens making it into the packing plant."

An across-the-industry quality management program is the best solution, agreed Smith.

"We have to have a collective effort of everyone who can and will be concerned to make sure that our products are indeed safe," he said.

Bob Harrington, director of technical services for the National Restaurant Association, said he welcomed earlier quality assurance from meat producers. The foodservice industry took most of the criticism during the 1993 *E. coli* scare because of Jack in the Box's cooking practices. Thorough cooking kills pathogens, but Harrington says that isn't as easy a directive as it sounds.

"We've got a problem in our industry because we have to respond to multiple masters," he said. "We have to ultimately do what our customers say they want. And people are coming back to rare meat."

By implementing HACCP standards early, everyone's job becomes a little easier, Harrington said.

Smith said in some instances, advanced ways of testing meat make a perfectly risk-free food

supply an impossible goal.

"God put pesticides inside plants to fight off the things that might come along and chew off their roots or limbs or leaves. And if we eat food, we're going to get those naturally occurring toxins," he said. Quoting a study done by Dr. Bruce Ames, a University of

Californis/Berkley researcher, Smith said naturally occurring carcinogens represent about 1,500 milligrams per day in our daily diet. Synthetic drug residues account for 0.019 milligrams. Neither exposure presents a serious risk of cancer, Smith said.

Rep. Smith States Objections

HARRISBURG (Dauphin Co.) — The Republican chairman of the House Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee recently said he objects to certain proposed changes in regulations governing farm use of water from the Susquehanna River Basin.

Specifically, York County Rep. Bruce Smith said he disagrees with a proposal developed by the Susquehanna River Basin Commission to impose fees on farmers for agricultural use of water from the river and the waters of the basin.

The commission is proposing the implementation of fees for agricultural water use which exceeds 20,000 gallons per day, as well as application and monitoring fees.

"This proposal would be a definite financial hardship for many farmers who are already financially hard-pressed. Under this proposal, farmers would be subject to

unreasonable fees ranging from \$850 to \$13,500 in the first year," Smith said.

The commission is an autonomous agency formed in 1970 by a compact between Pennsylvania, Maryland, New York and the federal government. It is currently in the process of reorganizing and revising regulations governing projects in the river basin.

Smith agreed that the commission's regulations require updating, but urged the panel to extend its comment period in order to provide farmers with more time to review the proposed changes and send comments. The comment deadline is Aug. 1.

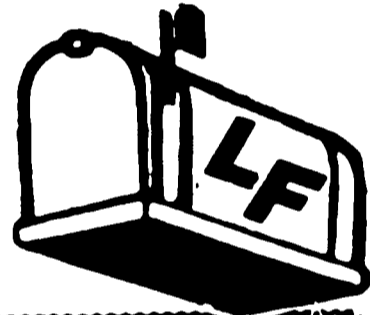
"It is unfortunate that the commission chose the busiest time of a farmer's year to seek comment on proposals which will initiate unexpected financial disadvantage on the agricultural community," he said. Smith recommended the comment period be extended into the winter months.

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