

FOOD DEFENSE IN THE MEAT AND POULTRY INDUSTRY

As an industry that sells nutritious food to more than 95 percent of Americans, meat and poultry companies place a high priority on ensuring the security of our food facilities and supply. While food defense is a relatively new concept for some consumers and the news media, it is not a new concept to meat and poultry processors.

The meat and poultry industry is one of the most heavily regulated and inspected industries in the U.S. and has operated in a secure mode for decades. The security infrastructure that we have built and refined over time to meet a variety of challenges is serving us well given the nation's heightened state of concern.

Plant Security

Meat and poultry processors recognize the enormous responsibility of providing safe and wholesome products to millions of Americans. Meat and poultry plants by design are closed, secure operations. Fences and security guards are commonplace to ensure that only designated personnel are permitted to enter plants. Visitors are restricted. The rare person who is granted access to a plant will be required to:

- Provide photo identification and be escorted.
- Remove all jewelry, watches, pagers, telephones and photographic equipment.
- Wear special boots, hairnets and sanitary frocks without pockets.
- Observe all sanitation and microbial control procedures, like washing hands and boots at regular intervals.
- Refrain from entering restricted areas.

Employees in meat and poultry plants are assigned to particular areas and often wear colored hardhats or uniforms to designate the areas where they work. This helps ensure staff are in appropriate places. For example, someone who works in raw material receiving would not be entering a packaging area due to the potential for cross-contamination and to ensure food security. Movement and production is monitored in many plants by security cameras.

Internal Food Safety Checks Can Serve Food Defense Needs

Meat and poultry companies benefit by selling the safest possible meat and poultry. Plants employ a variety of technologies and strategies to ensure safety. These same strategies can be useful in identifying food defense breaches that are physical, chemical or biological in nature. They include:

- Inspection of all animals before and after slaughter to identify animals that may not be fit for human consumption.
- Laboratory screening for unusual levels of compounds in animal tissues.
- Metal detectors or X-rays to identify any inadvertent metal contamination in products.

- Washes that use hot water, steam, or antimicrobials to clean carcasses and destroy bacteria.
- Post-packaging pasteurization, using hot water, infrared heat, or irradiation.
- Various microbiological tests to verify food safety interventions are destroying bacteria and that no other contamination has occurred.

Plants also must have in place Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) plans. Under HACCP, companies analyze where problems can occur and apply resources at critical points. In developing HACCP plans, companies must consider all potential physical, chemical and biological hazards and explain the steps they are taking to prevent problems.

HACCP encourages the industry to anticipate problems before they occur.

Government Oversight

In addition, more than 6,000 meat and poultry plants in all 50 states are continuously inspected by some 8,000 federal inspectors from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). State inspectors oversee another 3,000 small plants in 25 states. Inspectors are present in slaughter plants during every minute of operation and in processing plants on a daily basis.

Veterinary inspectors are present at every slaughter facility to ensure animals are healthy and fit for consumption. These veterinarians are skilled at identifying a host of animal diseases. In fact, many diseases that have been reported widely by news media in recent months have very clear symptoms that would prompt a veterinarian to remove an animal from the food supply rapidly.

Anthrax, for example, is an animal disease that occurs naturally around the world and in U.S. herds on rare occasions. Like many animal diseases, anthrax causes rapid and serious symptoms, recognizable to veterinary inspectors. In fact, animals with anthrax are typically so ill they will not survive transportation to a plant. Testament to this fact is the absence of a single diagnosed case of human anthrax from eating meat.

In addition to veterinary inspectors, food safety inspectors verify that plants are sanitary and that good manufacturing processes are being followed. These inspectors also routinely conduct tests for chemical and microbial contamination that supplement testing done by companies.

Imported Meat and Poultry Food Defense

USDA certifies meat and poultry inspection systems in foreign countries that wish to ship products to the U.S. Certified foreign plants must meet all U.S. rules and regulations or must operate under equivalent rules. Foreign meat and poultry inspectors must monitor food safety in virtually the same way as U.S. inspectors. USDA officials pay periodic visits to certify the foreign inspection programs. Foreign meat and poultry products are subject to reinspection to ensure safety before tentry into U.S. commerce.

Food Defense Since September 2001

A strong food defense infrastructure was well established in the meat and poultry industry before the events of September 2001. Still, meat and poultry companies have tightened existing food safety and defense strategies and further restricted their already limited visitor policies.

The North American Meat Institute (NAMI) has urged its members to review food defense plans, to enforce all visitor and identification policies, to develop crisis management plans and to identify in advance appropriate local, state and federal law enforcement officials in the event a food defense breach occurs. In addition, NAMI acts as a liaison between meat and poultry plants and the U.S. government on food defense issues to ensure that all precautions are being taken.

Consumers should be reassured by the secure nature of meat and poultry plants, by internal food safety procedures and by continuous government oversight that have made U.S. meat and poultry among the safest anywhere.

HELPFUL LINKS

North American Meat Institute

<http://www.meatinstitute.org>

FSIS Office of Food Defense and Emergency Response

http://www.fsis.usda.gov/Food_Defense_&_Emergency_Response/index.asp

Developing a Food Defense Plan

http://www.fsis.usda.gov/PDF/Food_Defense_Plan.pdf

U.S. Department of Agriculture

<http://www.usda.gov>