

As an industry that sells nutritious food to more than 95 percent of Americans, meat and poultry companies place a high priority on ensuring food defense. 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 that they have an enormous responsibility in 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 appropriate personnel are permitted to enter plants. Visitors are heavily 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 and not entering some parts of the plant.

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 that appropriate 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.

Meat and poultry plants in many states also participate in a special program with the Immigration and Naturalization Service that allows employers to do on line employment verification to ensure that employees are legal and presenting valid documents.

Programs like these help ensure the integrity and stability of our workforces, which play a vital role in providing safe and wholesome products.

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 microbiological in nature. They include:

- Veterinary inspection of all animals prior to slaughter to identify suspect or ill animals that may not be fit for human consumption.
- Government and private laboratory screening for unusual levels of compounds in animal tissues.
- Use of metal detectors to identify any inadvertent metal contamination in products
- Carcass washes that use hot water or dilute acid solutions to clean carcasses and destroy bacteria.
- Enormous "cabinets" that use superheated steam or water to pasteurize the outsides of carcasses.
- Post-packaging pasteurization, using hot water, infrared heat, or radiation.
- Various microbiological tests to ensure that 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 in their systems problems can occur and take steps to concentrate resources at those "critical" points. In developing HACCP plans, companies must consider all potential physical, chemical and microbiological hazards and explain the steps they are taking to prevent problems.

HACCP has creating a mindset in the industry in which we work to anticipate problems before they occur – the best way to prevent a crisis.

Government Oversight

In addition, approximately 6,000 meat and poultry plants in all 50 states are inspected aggressively by some 7,000 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 check every animal before slaughter to ensure that it is 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 that send clear warning signals 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 who check live animals, meat and poultry inspectors check to be sure that plants are sanitary and that safe manufacturing processes are being followed. These inspectors also routinely conduct tests for chemical and microbial contamination that supplement testing done by company staff.

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 rules that are equivalent to U.S. rules. Foreign meat and poultry inspectors must monitor safety in virtually the same way as U.S. inspectors. USDA officials pay periodic visits to certify the foreign inspection programs. When foreign meat and poultry arrive at U.S. borders, products are subject to reinspection to ensure safety before they are permitted in 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 defense and safety checks and further restricted their already limited visitor policies. For example, industry members of AMI developed Food Defense Guidelines that served as the basis for USDA guidelines for all meat and poultry establishments.

The American Meat Institute (AMI) has urged its members to review food defense plans, to enforce carefully 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 that a food defense breach occurs. In addition, AMI has acted 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 aggressive government oversight that have made U.S. meat and poultry among the safest anywhere.

Helpful Links

American Meat Institute
<http://www.meatami.com>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
<http://www.cdc.gov>

U.S. Department of Agriculture
<http://www.usda.gov>

Third-Party Experts

Carol Maczka
Assistant Administrator
USDA Office of Food Defense and Emergency Response
(202) 720-5643

James Roth, DVM
Director, Center for Food Security and Public Health
Iowa State University
(515) 294-8459

Jeremy Stump
Director, Homeland Security Staff
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
(202) 720-7654