

Producer Reaction

PAUL F. ENGLER*

The topic, "Meat Inspection in the Next Century", is very dear to the hearts of cattle producers and feeders here in the US. The destiny of our industry is totally tied to the entire food inspection process. Because of this, producers are extremely interested in not only what's happened in the past, but certainly in what are the plans for the future. We hope that the US meat industry will continue to have a reputation of having the worlds safest food supply. I recently returned from China, where I had gone, at the invitation of the Chinese government, to investigate cattle feeding opportunities in China. I visited feed yards and packing houses and saw not only no food inspection, but conditions that were much different than our as far as the slaughter, care and processing of beef animals. Refrigeration was virtually non-existent in their facilities.

From a food safety standpoint, the feed yard industry can certainly show improvement, however, I do believe that the industry is very cognizant of food safety. They feel they have big stake in ensuring their product is safe. These media disasters that occur periodically have hurt our industry terribly. I believe one of the alternatives proposed by USDA was a farm to retail HACCP program. This confused the feedlot industry and created the question as to understanding what type of HACCP program would work in their business. The industry is making some headway on this. An example of a program that has developed is the Texas Cattle Feeders Association "quality assurance program" which has been in place now for five or six years. This program has been quite effective especially in terms of reducing vaccination lesions. Lesion occurrence has been tracked and benchmarked by the industry and considerable improvement has been made in reducing the incidents of lesions. This program should extend back to the cow-calf producer since many times vaccination lesions happen before the animals reach the feedyard.

The industry has failed to address the issue of electronic identification of our animals. I have been an advocate of this but have definitely been in the minority. I think elec-

tronic identification should be adopted so that an accurate trace back of animals can occur. This will aid in identifying problems which have a live animal source and allow the industry to know about and solve those problems more quickly than is now the case. Animal identification would allow the industry to trace these problems back to the source whether it be the feed yard or the ranch.

Producers do in fact have a big stake in food safety and inspection. The beef industry and feedlot industry has had a real problem with the inequities between poultry inspection and beef and pork inspection. Our industry is very sensitive about these inequities. These have made it very difficult to remain competitive with poultry. Poultry has a lot of inherited advantages over the red meat industry in terms of production efficiencies, uniformity, consistency of very good product, etc. Red meat producers would like to see the inequities that now exist between the two inspection systems corrected such that economic discrepancies caused by inspection differences disappear.

Another point that has always amazed me as it relates to food safety is the concern that the American public has for what they put in their mouths with the exception of tobacco and alcohol, the two biggest killers we have in our society today. This concern over food safety probably has been magnified by the media and at the same time, the tobacco and alcohol problems have been ignored. Perhaps this is because tobacco and alcohol are old news and they have been accepted as a risk by society. Any new food inspection program must be one that at least will give the media the confidence in our food supply so that we don't have to periodically put up with incidences like the Oprah Winfrey show who sensationalized the "mad cow" incidence. Our industry, I can assure you, was inflamed by that program. Dr. Gary Weber with the NCBA was invited to be on the show but it was pretaped and conservatively 75% of his remarks were edited out of the program that was aired. Fortunately, Oprah did have a follow-up program where she allowed Dr. Weber the opportunity to clear up some of the falsehoods and inaccuracies that came out in the first program. Why is this concern to our industry? The most recent issue of *Time* magazine, dated June 17th, lists the 25 most influential people in the US today. I would encourage you to read this interesting article of who makes up the 25 most influential, not powerful, people in the US today. One of those top 25 is Oprah

*P.F. Engler, President, Cactus Feeders, Inc., Box 3050, Amarillo, TX 79116-3050.

Reciprocal Meat Conference Proceedings, Volume 49, 1996.

Winfrey. The article even mentioned the impact that her program on the mad cow disease had on cattle prices. This illustrates the impact that the media has on our business.

In summary, red meat producers livelihood depend upon a meat inspection system that safeguards the nation's food supply. Because of this, producers are vitally interested in working to ensure that the US system is effective, efficient

and uniformly applied in all plants and across all species. The system must restore full consumer confidence in the safety of meat and meat products. A part of this restoration of confidence of the consumer is a matter of convincing the nations media that any new meat inspection system is effective at ensuring meat safety. Producers must work with other interested parties in developing this system.

FOOD SAFETY

Meat Inspection Packer/Processor

JAMES H. HODGES*

It's certainly a pleasure for me to share with you some general perspectives on the future of meat and poultry inspection.

First, let's set the stage by looking at the current debate. The issue of food safety is increasingly becoming an emotional and political debate. It is a debate about perception, and winners and losers. It is unfortunate that the debate is not one based on science, but one based on what people believe. There are a variety of factors that enter into inspection reform. Many of these factors are based on one's particular agenda. They may include anti-biotechnology, animal rights, job security for federal inspectors, political advantages for the politicians or simply fundraising for special interest groups. All of the issues, and many more, cloud the real facts that we need to establish a risk-based inspection system that is based on sound science and facts.

The *E.coli* O157:H7 outbreak in the Northwest in 1993 changed the way that we look at food safety. Microbiological issues and pathogens on raw meat took on a new significance. Prior to the Washington State outbreak, pathogens on raw meat were mostly an internal debate within the industry, but the highly publicized outbreak pushed the issue of pathogen control forward to food service and household

consumers and backwards toward the farm. Unfortunately, most of the debate in Washington since that time has focused on testing, detection and punitive regulatory measures, not prevention.

It is generally recognized that raw meat and poultry contain some level of pathogens, and the most effective critical control point is proper cooking and handling. That premise is increasingly being questioned with greater regularity as products move through food distribution channels. Each segment is being asked the question, "Have you done all that you can do to reduce the likelihood that pathogens will be present on the product?" That's a far different question than, "Are meat and poultry products safe?"

With the publication of USDA's Pathogen Reduction/HACCP rule within the next few weeks, the government and industry are embarking on fundamental changes in the way inspection is conducted in meat and poultry plants. For the first time in history, the industry will be required to develop and implement HACCP programs and standard operating procedures for sanitation, and to meet a regulatory standard for *Salmonella* and generic *E.coli* on raw meat and poultry. Publication of the so called mega-reg; however, will not assure food safety. Implementation of safe food production practices by industry coupled with government oversight to verify safe food production are the keys to food safety. The message that no regulatory program can assure safe food many times gets lost in the increasingly contentious debate over how we should be changing the inspection program. No one is satisfied with the current system, least of all industry that must operate under the existing government inspection. Fairly, or unfairly, the inspection system's public credibility is being

*J.H. Hodges, Senior Vice President for Regulatory Affairs, American Meat Institute, P.O. Box 3556, Washington, DC 20007.

Reciprocal Meat Conference Proceedings, Volume 49, 1996.