

The USDA And The F.S.I.S

Listeriosis, the infection of *listeria monocytogenes* (sometimes called “the hot-dog disease”) was responsible for killing twenty-three Canadians during a single incident of food contamination just four years ago! Four separate class-action lawsuits were filed in three provinces. In Ontario alone, the suit is claiming damages of \$350 million dollars.

I have to be one of the few people who seem to think that our USDA and FSIS are performing an incredibly difficult task very well. And believe me, I’ve watched them for some time. I’ve talked to them on the phone and check with them regularly for new rules and innovations. In my opinion, they are performing a remarkable task very well. But, it hasn’t always been that way.

Renown author Upton Sinclair described the filthy conditions of a Chicago meatpacking house in nauseating detail in 1905. His novel clearly defined the safety hazards that the germ-infested, foul, and unsanitary conditions posed to meat consumers everywhere. Sinclair’s publication caused public furor and soon consumers were demanding changes in meat handling and meat products production. Sinclair urged President Theodore Roosevelt to support legislation requiring not only the clean-up of the industry, but the presence of federal inspectors inside all meat-packing houses. The public also insisted that a set of legal guidelines be established for the industry. One year later, both the Food and Drug Act and the Meat Inspection Act were passed. Note that this was not big government pushing legislation down the throats of the consumer. The two new federal acts were the result of public response! The new laws and regulations put many meat packers out of business. Others cleaned up their act. It was an expensive and unparalleled step in the history of the US meat industry.

The United States Department of Agriculture’s “Bureau of Chemistry” enforced the two federal acts until 1927, when the old 1906 Food and Drug Act was reorganized becoming the Food, Drug, and Insecticide Administration. Four years later it became the Food and Drug Administration. Just before World War II, the FDA was transferred from the USDA to the Federal Security Agency – which became the Department of Health and Human Services in 1953. Under the Eisenhower administration, many positive changes were made and new procedures were established, further insuring the health of the public by eliminating many unsanitary practices responsible for meat contamination. Then during the 1950s and 1960s, something totally unprecedented took place. Legally required routine inspection increasingly focused on wholesomeness and visible contamination. At last, the prevalence of animal disease as a food safety problem began to decrease. However, there was yet no legislation protecting the consumer from mislabeling and something we know as “economic adulteration”. And believe me, back then there was plenty of “economic adulteration” in the meat industry. Again, the public spoke up. Again the government responded. I was there and I lived through it. In 1958 the “Food Additive Amendment” was established and for the first time in our history, inspectors had the “teeth” to enforce laws regarding the addition of questionable chemicals including animal drug residues found in meat and poultry products and sausages.

During my college years, the 1967 Wholesome Meat Act was passed. Laws became clearly defined and each state in the Union was required to conduct adequate inspections of America’s meat. Rytek Kutas

was very excited about the new legislation and remarked how it made “sloppy meat houses and packing plants finally clean-up”. Throughout the 1970’s, the names of the various inspection agencies were scrambled around a bit and even placed beneath new divisions of the USDA. Finally, in 1977 the Food Safety And Quality Service was established and assigned to the Animal And Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) which had been established in 1972. Then on June 17, 1981, the Food Safety And Quality Service was renamed the “Food Safety and Inspection Service” (today’s FSIS).

In 1993, an outbreak of E. coli O157:H7 occurred in the Pacific Northwest. It killed four persons and caused the illness of another 400! Again the public rallied and demanded change for safer ground beef products – including hot dogs! The FSIS responded by increasing more “science-based” testing rather than relying upon the old organoleptic methods of inspection (involving sight, touch, and smell). The FSIS established the first HACCP or “Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point” system of meat inspection and during the summer of 1996, new laws regarding the prevention and reduction of microbial pathogens in raw meat products took effect. In 2000, further legislation beefed up the enforcement of these new laws. Today more than 9,000 meat processing plants in the United States are regularly inspected for microbial pathogens in meat - (6,500 federally-inspected and 2,550 state-inspected meat and poultry slaughtering and processing plants). Our national Center For Disease Control has attributed the implementation of the new laws as the primary factor responsible for the decline of bacterial food-borne illness in our country since 1996. Incredible as it seems, all pork found in retail stores is either USDA inspected for wholesomeness or inspected by state systems which have standards equal to the federal government. Each animal and its internal organs are inspected for signs of disease. Now that’s something that simply has not taken place historically – especially using today’s microbial detection savvy and equipment.

Best Wishes,

Chuckwagon