

Avoid going into damage control

A recent poll found that more than 40% of Americans believed they were sickened by something they ate in the past two years. More than half cut the culprit from their diet. One slip can damage a whole industry. How do you avoid a food safety disaster? Margaret Langdon asked the experts.

As the old saying goes, prevention is better than cure. Paying close attention to cleanliness, procedures and monitoring pays off in spades by reducing the likelihood of contamination and drawing attention to any potential problems that may be – quite literally – in the pipeline.

Preventative measures such as good cleaning systems are essential, and manufacturers should contact their local food safety authority for advice on how to set them up properly, said **Karissa Walker**, operational and services manager with Dairy Food Safety Victoria (DFSV).

“Often companies will take the information away, have a look at their processes and

find the problem themselves. We can help them troubleshoot and tell them what areas they might want to look at,” Ms Walker said.

For a recurring problem, other resources are often on hand. For example, DFSV has a science and innovation team that goes on-site, observes the manufacturing processes and provides a written report about the areas that could be improved.

Once a reliable food safety system is set up, you need to train your staff in how to use it. “Even if you have the best systems in place, if staff aren’t trained in them, errors can creep in,” Ms Walker said.

Top to bottom detection

Finding the source of a contamination can be a complex task. **Greg Peisley**, director of programs and business development at Klen International, works with manufacturers to establish clean-in-place (CIP) processes that match the business’ needs. When a problem creeps in, it pays to be methodical, he said.

“You need to consider all the possible external factors and eliminate them one by one,” he said. “We look for the obvious things first. How frequently is the cleaning procedure done? How is it monitored? How is it controlled? How long has this problem been in place? What external factors might contribute to the problem?”

“The problem could be caused by a new machinery operator, a change of procedure or a change in manufactured products that presents different cleaning issues. It may be that the pipework has been changed, creating a dead end through which the cleaning solution can’t flow. Or that some of the inputs or water quality have changed.

“You might even find that the problem is not related to the equipment you are working on. There may be an adjacent piece of equipment robbing the system of hot water. There are a whole series of factors that we look at and then we try to take a holistic approach.

If you discover a food safety problem in your plant, such as an E.coli contamination, you need to act quickly to avoid putting your business and your entire industry at risk.



Solving food safety problems is like detective work, and it's rare that two problems are exactly the same.

"It really is like detective work, and it's rare that two problems are exactly the same. Each one has its little nuances.

CIP profiling and validation is an extremely useful tool. It confirms that the process is doing what it's supposed to do, and it highlights areas for potential savings of time and water.

"You might set your system up, put your equipment on, tweak it so that you've got it right, and then come back in six or 12 months and do it again. Don't take it for granted that you do it once and it stays that way forever."

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What to do in a food safety emergency

Step 1 – Act quickly

- Isolate the product
- Notify authorities
- Stop production
- Isolate affected areas
- Review product records
- Conduct a recall if necessary

Step 2 – Investigate the cause

- Undertake a sampling of product/ environment

- Test materials
- Review records
- Identify and rectify the cause

Step 3 – Correct and recover

- Clean and disinfect
- Verify effectiveness of cleaning
- Run a clearance program
- Dispose of contaminated product
- Review and document

Source: ANZDAC Pathogen Manual

MEMBRANE PLANTS FOR DAIRY APPLICATIONS

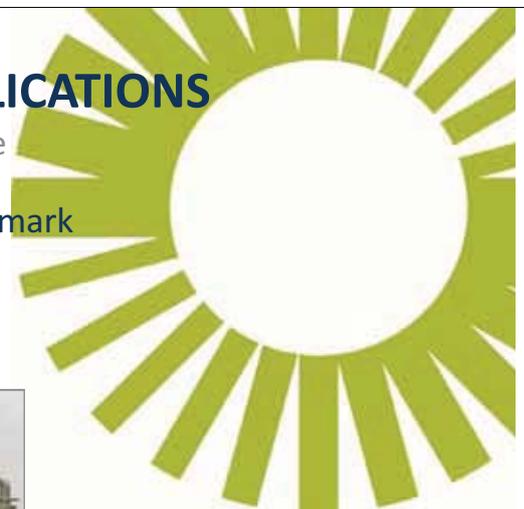
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Damage control

Despite the best efforts, things could still go wrong. If it is a problem that could affect public health and safety, it might be time to put a recall plan into action.

The responsibility for co-ordinating food recalls falls to Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ). Communication manager **Lydia Buchtmann** recommended manufacturers contact FSANZ and their local state health agency to help them decide whether a recall is necessary.

"A recall occurs only if there is a risk to public health and safety. We'd rather manufacturers contact us early if they think there are concerns," Ms Buchtmann said.

The vast majority of recalls in Australia are precautionary and the result of extensive company testing. The decision to recall a product is voluntary, but once the process is under way it becomes mandatory and product must be taken off the shelves.

While a food recall plan is a legal

requirement, each manufacturer would do well to tailor it to their specific needs by including details of the:

- customers, distributors and others who need to be alerted in case of an emergency;
- staff members responsible for various recall-related tasks;
- Government authorities to notify of the recall;
- publicity materials, such as media statements, recall notices and print advertisements; and
- consultants or PR agencies engaged to help with product recalls.

FSANZ recommends companies practise their recall plans by staging mock recalls, similar to testing an evacuation plan in the case of a fire. The plan should be reviewed regularly, particularly if new products are added to the company's range or new staff members join the business. Other considerations include staffing and budgeting for a recall, both aiming to minimise disruption to regular business operations. ■

Useful websites

Dairy Food Safety Victoria:
www.dairysafe.vic.gov.au

Information about licensing and auditing, technical notes, food safety guidelines, ANZDAC documents and standards.

FSANZ: www.foodstandards.gov.au

FSANZ recall number: (02) 6271 2610 or 0412 166 965 (after hours)

State government departments

- NSW Food Authority:
www.foodauthority.nsw.gov.au
- Queensland Department of Health:
www.health.qld.gov.au
- SA Department of Human Services:
www.health.sa.gov.au/pehs
- Tasmanian Department of Health & Human Services:
www.dhhs.tas.gov.au
- Vic Department of Human Services:
www.health.vic.gov.au/foodsafety
- Department of Health WA:
www.health.wa.gov.au

A reliable safety plan and trained staff who know how to put it into action can mean the difference between staying in business and hanging up your hat.

