

Positives for Poultry in 2005

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Food Manufacturing magazine asked key industry experts presenting at the International Poultry Exposition, January 26-28, 2005 at the Georgia World Congress Center, to comment on the key issues confronting the poultry industry in 2005. The experts, who will be offering detailed presentations on the subjects at the expo, cited Animal Welfare, Food Safety, Facility Security, Environment Management and Economics as among the major national and international issues.

Animal Welfare Audits

Today's consumers are well educated and responsible about what they are purchasing. Consumers are now, more than ever before, applying moral consideration to consumption.

Consequently, in order to satisfy their customers, there is more pressure being placed on poultry companies to assure their customers that products are being produced in a suitable, humane fashion.

This push for brand assurance is coupled with society's increasing knowledge base of chickens as living specimens. More data has given credence to the possibility that chickens are capable of perceiving their own well-being.

Thus, more and more prestigious companies, such as McDonalds, are initiating audits on their suppliers.

Bruce Webster, Associate Professor of Poultry Science, University of Georgia, pointed out that "for the first time, companies are including non-economic, i.e., animal welfare-related, factors in their decision-making process. This represents a tremendous step forward for the industry."

Audits serve an important purpose in that they can bring attention to things that people who work with birds on a daily basis might overlook. A process may be

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deemed successful from an operational standpoint, while it is still unsuccessful from an animal welfare perspective. Managers who deal with large numbers of birds have to focus on how well the process is working overall. It can be easy not to notice the few birds for which the process does not work well.

“Welfare is not just how well you’re treating most birds, but it’s how badly you’re treating some,” said Webster.

It is important also to keep in mind that the audit process is not intended merely to point out problems, but also to encourage solutions.

“The point is to help encourage animal welfare throughout the company. Audits are proving highly effective over time in introducing this new element to the industry,” said Webster.

Human Health Concerns

In the case of Avian Influenza, biosecurity can prove to be more important than prevention by vaccination, claims David Swayne, Laboratory Director, USDA, Southeast Poultry Research Laboratory.

“Vaccination is not absolute prevention,” said Swayne.

In fact, vaccination is recommended only in high risk situations. Avian Influenza has 15 different subtypes, all of which would require different vaccines to prevent. Thus, the “decision to vaccinate is a country to country decision,” said Swayne.

Avian Influenza varies in its severity and can be broken down into low pathogenicity (LP) and high pathogenicity (HP) types. In the last 50 years, there have been only two reported outbreaks of HP influenza in the United States—one in 1983 and one in 2004. Consequently, since the risk of HP infection is so low, poultry in the U.S. is not vaccinated against Avian Influenza.

While the health affects on the actual infected chickens vary with severity of the disease, cooking or pasteurization can kill both low and high pathogenicity viruses—so humans, in theory, can safely consume affected meat. However, it has been agreed at the international level to destroy HP birds before they reach the consumer’s table, reported Swayne.

In the event of a HP infection, the state government will quarantine the infected farm, kill the exposed birds, dispose of them in an environmentally sound fashion, and then clean the farm appropriately to prevent the further spread of the disease.

The government relies heavily on a network system of veterinarians in the field when it comes to reporting outbreaks. When vets are called to investigate high death rates in flocks, they will then report suspicious findings to a state vet, who will in turn report to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). The USDA’s

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involvement is centered around its mission to make sure consumers are eating only healthy, non-diseased animals.

Low Pathogenic Avian Influenza in Commercial Operations

Low Pathogenic Avian Influenza (LPAI) is classified as a low risk disease, and therefore organizations such as the Organization International des Epizooties (OIE), an international body that classifies and regulates animal disease, does not require it to be reported.

LPAI presents no threat to humans. According to Andrew Rhorer, Senior Coordinator for the national Poultry Improvement Plan, "there is no evidence that LPAI is transmitted in the meat of poultry, therefore, birds that have recovered can be consumed safely." However one of the dangers of LPAI is that certain strains (H5 and H7 specifically) can mutate into highly pathogenic avian influenza, which can have a poultry mortality rate of close to 100 percent.

This being said, several United States trading partners have put restrictions in place which require a higher level of insurance that traded poultry has not been exposed to either LPAI or High Pathogenic Avian Influenza.

The OIE has proposed to redefine notifiable avian influenza as an infection of poultry caused by any influenza "A" virus of the H5 or H7 subtypes. Therefore, H5/H7 LPAI would be considered a notifiable disease.

In addition, the National Poultry Improvement Plan, which consists of a variety of voluntary programs designed to prevent and control poultry diseases, has proposed to amend the plan to establish a voluntary control program for the H5/H7 subtypes. This interim final rule should be published sometime in mid 2005.

Food & Facility Security

Potential threats in the poultry industry span beyond contagious diseases. Animal and environmental rights activists, terrorists, and even disgruntled employees present major security threats for poultry companies.

According to Fred Masci, Director, Audit and Security, animal and environmental rights activists present the largest single threat. "These organizations will do whatever it takes to achieve their objectives," said Masci.

"Whatever it takes" includes such crimes as burning feed haul trucks, setting fire to warehouses, spray painting the homes of company executives, and releasing ammonia into plants to cause their evacuation and plant shut down. At a Pilgrim's Pride plant in Moorefield, West Virginia, an animal rights activist with PETA, pretended to be an applicant, gained access to the plant as an employee, sneaked

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in a camera and took eight months worth of footage from October 2003 to May 2004. This footage was then edited down to eight minutes and published on the internet and released to the media on July 22, 2004 as an example of how chickens were being “abused.”

According to Masci, access control is the first step necessary in maintaining food and plant security. This includes requiring positive identification (picture IDs, sign-in and sign-out at security or reception, proximity cards, magnetic locks on doors with card readers, etc.) prior to entering the plant facility.

“Major customers are insisting that a good food security program be in place,” said Masci.

Gold Kist, Atlanta, GA, regarded as an industry leader when it comes to security measures, recognizes that a good and proactive security program is absolutely essential in today’s environment.

Gold Kist is using the latest technology and security equipment, together with manual processes and procedures (i.e., background checks) to reassure its customers. Advanced technology such as Digital Video Recording equipment and remote surveillance software allows Gold Kist managers to view surveillance videos from their home or office PCs and laptops.

Ultimately, Gold Kist, as well as other forward-looking companies, will put everything on a wide area network, and be able to monitor plants and facilities from the corporate office central monitoring station.

“Any good security program examines and understands the threats and establishes the proper combination of people, technology, equipment, policies and procedures to anticipate and protect against these threats,” concluded Masci.

Practical Impacts of Air Regulation

Currently, air emissions are not regulated in the poultry industry.

However, depending on various court rulings, the industry could be just months away from a drastic change in policy.

The basic issue is derived from two, interrelated sources: ammonia emissions and particulate matter. Both are considered to be substantial contributors to atmospheric pollution.

Logically, measuring emissions from a biological unit (in this case, chickens) is more challenging than measuring emissions from a machine, which is the more traditional target of air regulation.

John Chlada, Vice President, Environmental Affairs at Perdue said, “We’re taking a

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statute crafted for industry and applying it to animal agriculture. This puts us in a whole new arena. Now we're trying to find out when and how this will play out."

There are a plethora of additional questions surrounding this issue. Who is responsible for this regulating? Will the resulting increase in reporting, paperwork, etc. pay off at the environmental level? Will it benefit the industry? What about added costs and liability exposure?

Small, family-owned farms, which often work in contract with larger suppliers, such as Perdue, will bear a large portion of the burden. Air regulation means increased record keeping requirements, 24 hour notification to regulatory agencies, and possible fines for failure to report high emissions, amongst other responsibilities. Most of these smaller farms do not have environmental managers and departments on staff to handle such responsibilities.

A major educational effort—not just for farmers, but for regulators alike—will be necessary to properly equip the industry for the impending changes, said Chlada.

Valuing America's Poultry Farms

According to Mike Donohue, Vice President, Agri Stats, Inc., 2004 has been a good year for chickens.

Poultry, like anything else in the market, is subject to the fluctuation of supply and demand, and consumer demand. The period 2001-2002, which, according to Donohue, was one of the worst runs for chicken, illustrated the sensitivity of the poultry market. Too much chicken in the market and the Russian ban on imports caused prices to fall.

Basic economics dictate that when companies rapidly expand production, the supply begins to exceed the demand, and prices drop.

Production cutbacks in late 2003 led to lower supply through the first half of 2004. The popularity of the Atkins and Atkins like diets stimulated the demand for protein and concerns about mad cow disease helped improve the demand for chicken in particular.

Feed prices play a large role in the price of poultry. According to Donohue, feed prices account for 55 percent of the live production cost for chicken. As corn and soybean prices rise, so does the cost of chicken production.

That being said, the current low grain prices (\$2.50 per bushel of corn and \$175 per ton of soybean meal at the farm) and the strength of the export market will mean a good year for the chicken market.

The experts consulted for this article along with several other speakers will be presenting Educational Programs at the International Poultry Exposition on

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Thursday, January 27. Admission will be free to exposition attendees.

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