Worthwhile Operational Guidelines & Suggestions

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What is your *Listeria* control program?

Listeria monocytogenes is a food-borne pathogen, commonly found in food production environments, with the unique ability to survive and multiply under adverse conditions of low oxygen, low temperatures, acid conditions, high salt levels and even exposure to chlorine. Although *L. monocytogenes* are readily destroyed by typical cooking temperatures, post-heating product contamination of ready-to-eat (RTE) products (i.e., frankfurters, luncheon meats, salami and sausages) is likely if the post-lethality environment (i.e., slicing and packaging areas of the plant) is contaminated.
The Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) interim final rule (published in the Federal Register on June 6, 2003) requires that all establishments that produce RTE products develop written programs (i.e., HACCP programs, SSOP's or other prerequisite programs) to control this organism and to verify the effectiveness of control programs through microbial testing. Plants are also required to share testing data and other plant generated control information with the FSIS. The FSIS will continue to conduct random testing to verify each establishment's control program. Facility managers are provided with three alternatives to control *Listeria:*

1. Employ both a post-lethality treatment and a growth inhibitor on RTE products. FSIS verification activities will focus on the effectiveness of post-lethality treatment(s).
2. Employ either a post-lethality treatment or a growth inhibitor. These facilities will be subject to more frequent verification activities by the FSIS.
3. Employ standard sanitation measures only. Facilities opting for this option will be targeted with the most frequent level of FSIS verification.

Information on product type (frankfurters and deli meats are identified as high-risk products for listeriosis) and production volume (large volumes higher risk) is critical for FSIS to implement a risk-based verification–testing programs. The rule also enables companies to label their RTE products to describe the process(es) used to eliminate or reduce *L. monocytogenes* and/or suppress its growth.

Contact: S. F. Bilgili, Ph.D. (334) 844-2612 sbilgili@acesag.auburn.edu
Poultry Science Department, Auburn University, Auburn, AL 36849-5416
www.ag.auburn.edu/dept/ph/