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Abstract

Control of *Listeri*a in ready-to-eat (RTE) meat operations has been a priority for industry for over a decade. Data from the Centers for Disease Control show that the rate of food-borne *listeriosis* is declining, approaching the Healthy People 2010 goal of 0.25 cases/ 100,000 population significantly ahead of schedule. Coinciding with reduction in *listeriosis*, incidence of *Listeria monocytogenes* (Lm) in RTE meat products has reduced 70% since mandatory HACCP was implemented in 1998. Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) data show a 70% decline in Lm prevalence over the last five years for hot dogs, deli meats, and other ready-to-eat products. Despite progress in protecting public health-due primarily to environmental sampling programs, ingredients that inhibit Lm growth and application of thermal post-lethality treatments-focus on control of Lm remains intense. As a result of recent *listeriosis* outbreaks, the Food and Drug Administration conducted a *Listeria* Risk Assessment that analyzed 23 food categories for potential to cause *listeriosis*. Deli meats and non-reheated frankfurters are in the highest risk category. The FSIS Interim Final Rule on Control of Lm in RTE Meat and Poultry products re-focused attention on the need to exercise optimal control of *Listeria* in the processing environment. The rule encourages RTE manufacturers to incorporate post-lethality treatments and utilize Lm-inhibiting ingredients or processes to reduce the risk of Lm presence and growth. Manufacturers who choose not to implement these technologies are required to have more rigorous *Listeria* sanitation and testing programs and will receive greater regulatory scrutiny. To coincide with complying with the FSIS rule, industry adopted the following key strategies: 1) aggressive environmental monitoring for *Listeria* indicator groups; 2) effective corrective actions; 3) proper equipment design; 4) adherence to GMPs and SSOPs; 5) effective product formulations; 6) appropriate post lethality treatments. This talk will explore these strategies.