

Red alert



A guide to effective food security and traceability. By **Mark Jarvis**, President, Food Safety Division, The Steritech Group

Many food service operators today are starting to wonder just how vulnerable they might be to a malicious biological attack.

'Bioweapons' such as *Salmonella*, *E. coli*., *Botulinum* and *Shigella* can cause foodborne illness when food is not prepared properly or when it is contaminated by improper handling. They can also be introduced deliberately into a food or water supply to cause harm. In addition, other hazardous materials

such as pesticides and cleaning agents (commonly found in many food-related facilities) can also be used for deliberate contamination.

But even the smallest operators can take charge and responsibility for increasing food safety and security in their establishment. This can be achieved via a stringent program of food security and traceability by applying standard operating procedures (SOPs) for food safety, employee and management

training, strong vendor relationships, a crisis management plan and physical facility readiness toward ensuring that food under their control will not be subject to tampering or other malicious, criminal or terrorist actions.

MANAGEMENT

A key step in any food safety/security plan is to assign primary food security responsibility to one individual and to make certain that this individual is fully educated

in the requirements of the assignment. This individual should be in charge of daily checks of the key areas as well as maintaining an internal organizational checklist. Be sure to assign a back-up for this individual for round-the-clock coverage.

Management also needs to maintain an environment of total control for the workforce. Know who is on duty and who should be in the building at any given time. Daily activities should be supervised, including activities conducted by contract workers, support staff and volunteers.

Management should also be encouraged to have a crisis and product recall plan in place and to ensure that their suppliers also have a recall plan. Have a step-by-step plan for responding to tampering or other criminal or terrorist actions, including identifying,

isolating and securing affected products. Also, develop an internal communications system to inform and update staff as well as an external communications system for communicating with the public. Regularly conduct emergency drills and post evacuation procedures prominently.

EMPLOYEES

Use pre-hire screening programs to check all applicants' immigration status and criminal background, without regard to their race, religion or ethnic background. Pay special attention to contract, seasonal and temporary employees. Require employees to wear uniforms and other identification and collect IDs (as well as keys and access cards) upon termination or resignation. Restrict employees' personal items to specified



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areas, away from food storage and production areas.

Incorporate food security awareness into initial and ongoing training for all employees and volunteers. Employees should be encouraged to be alert and to investigate or notify management of anything that seems suspicious or out of the ordinary. Be sure that employees know how and where to report potential threats.

SUPPLIERS/VENDORS

Require suppliers and vendors to provide documentation on their food safety/security practices, including provisions for rapid notification of product recalls. Restrict all deliveries to scheduled times. Inspect inbound and outbound vehicles. When inbound vehicles arrive, immediately reconcile deliveries with what was ordered. Investigate missing items as well as any ‘additional’ items that were not ordered. Inspect all incoming products for signs of tampering, contamination or damage and reject any suspicious food. This is good practice in general, not just in terms of food security.

PHYSICAL FACILITY

Vulnerable areas such as food handling and storage and employee lockers should have restricted entry. Establish clear zones: for the public, for employees and for supplier representatives such as truck drivers and delivery people. Protect the perimeter with secure doors and a program to account for all keys.

Keep an accurate inventory of all equipment, food, ingredients, utensils, chemicals and supplies. It is especially important to develop a system to log and track hazardous materials such as cleaning chemicals and investigate promptly if anything is missing. Closely monitor food

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How do you:

- Know that your products are made to specification?
- Track the source and destination of all product components?
- Know what inventory and work in process are in your bulk systems?
- Meet demanding QA and regulatory requirements for tracking product and process changes?
- Manage multiple product specifications?

Do all the above within a budget your market and margins will support?



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- Change management
- Product specifications at a single point of entry

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FOOD TRACEABILITY AUDITS

Approximately three-quarters of foodborne illness outbreaks start at the retail level. Poor food handling or warehousing at a supplier's location means outbreaks can spread quickly. Fortunately for retailers and their suppliers, independent food safety auditing firms (such as The Steritech Group) can take snapshot views of a company's processes through quality systems audits to ensure that, for example, if a processor says it is doing traceability, they can prove it.

These quality systems audits check whether suppliers can verify when an ingredient was manufactured and even what operator was at the controls. The auditor can then guide clients in setting up product tracking systems using simple packaging dates or more sophisticated codes. Once the tracking system is in place, many clients are advised to conduct mock recalls to test the system, giving the auditor a way to judge how effectively a recalled product can be traced all the way through the distribution chain.

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holding and serving areas, especially open display areas such as salad bars. Never leave food unsecured or unattended at any stage of delivery, storage, preparation or service.

By taking the necessary steps outlined here to implement a tightly controlled security plan at your facility, you can be confident that you are guarding against deliberate contamination of the food supply within your operation. ■

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