What's in Store for Food Manufacturing?

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Salmonella. E-coli. Listeria.

These are the words people have started to fear more and more; they're practically swears. From cilantro and spinach to peanut butter and eggs, food recalls have been springing up with increased frequency in the past year or so. The litany of outbreaks — resulting in product fear, illness and, in some instances, death — has people demanding safer consumables.

Legislation around food safety appeared to have stalled, with the House passing a stringent food safety bill in 2009, but in the past few weeks, there has been a flurry of activity over the Food and Drug Administration Food Safety Modernization Act. This bill indicates that the FDA will have increased oversight over much of the U.S.'s food supply, farmers and food companies will have new responsibilities to prevent contamination, and imported foods will have to abide by new U.S. standards.

The bill keeps getting bounced between the two houses for amendments, with anticipation mounting as to whose version finds success. While the nation waits to see if the bill will get passed prior to the conclusion of the lame-duck session, one can't help but speculate about the impact the bill will have on the industry.

Upon contemplation of the FDA's expanded role, Venkat Rajaji, PLM Product Manager at Infor, acknowledges that there will be barriers and restrictions, but there are changes that definitely need to take place. Specifically, "companies will need to adapt to more of an enterprise-wide solution which allows manufacturers to make better claims, support what's on labels, and test during the manufacturing process." To meet these challenges, companies will have to make sure that they have the right tools to implement any changes.

In preparation for this bill, Jack Payne, Vice President of Enterprise Software for CDC Software, believes food processors should be "reviewing the current industry certification, like SQF 200, and evaluating … internal processes, procedures, and current investments." These cautious steps are to ensure that nothing extreme is

done until the bill becomes law, as the wrong anticipatory preparation could prove a costly error.

Similarly, Rajaji believes food manufacturers should be prepared to “invest in their internal policies, procedures, and technology solutions … [beginning] in the design phases and extend[ing] the entire way through to execution.” Being proactive sooner rather than later will hopefully assuage the burden of change later on down the line.

While consumers will definitely appreciate the firmer stand against food-related problems, Payne has trepidation about the impact it will have on smaller processors. He posits that smaller operations “will not be able to cope with the increased paperwork and heavy fines, [and] it’s probably a matter of time before these operations are forced out of business.”

If Payne’s words are seen as pessimistic, they may be for a good reason. The intentions for increased food safety are clearly there, but the myriad of questions stemming from the bill can quickly quell the positives. Questions such as these are only the beginning: How many processors have the appropriate programs in place already? Will they be able to invest in new technology? How will smaller facilities adjust?

The list could go on.

Despite all the questions and conjecture, the only thing left to do is wait to see what definitively lies ahead for the future of food manufacturing.

What do you think lies ahead? Let me know via e-mail at lauren.kiesow@advantagemedia.com *[1].*

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