Divide and Conquer

Separator curtains aid productivity, compliance and asset utilization

By Tony Goff Living under the lid of tight margins for food processors creates the mission of getting as much production out of equipment as possible while getting the most out of every square foot of floor space. The snag in such careful planning comes when equipment has to be cleaned.

Overspray Problem

The inside of a piece of process equipment is not a problem. COP and CIP cleaning systems take care of sanitizing the working parts, lines and tanks without mess. An issue arises, however, with washing down the outside of equipment. Because of high-pressure sprays and cleaning chemicals, system washdown within these tight quarters means having to clean all the process lines. The overspray from hand-held sprayers can contaminate people and machinery up to 20 feet away. The over-splash not only includes the solution but the dirt and food particles blasted off with it. Even if the cleaning operator is extremely careful about where the spray is laid down &#151 and that is almost impossible &#151 blowing off the solution with as little as an air hose can contaminate nearby equipment. Under these conditions, there is no way that a food processing plant wants to risk non-compliance by operating a production run. Typically, when equipment undergoes an exterior wash, it's necessary to shut down operation in the entire area of the cleaning. This routine leads to a partial, if not an entire, graveyard shift, usually at night, devoted to cleaning, ultimately with no product being run during that period for the entire plant. Many plants would like to free themselves from these rigid cleaning times.

Clean Solution

The size of the cleaning area can be determined by the length of the curtain track hanging from the ceiling. The track can run in many directions around the various processing areas, and if the configuration is set up with a level of forethought, one curtain can be used throughout an area housing multiple processing systems. When the curtain is not being used, it can be folded up close to the wall, enabling unimpeded material handling from the receiving dock through the processing/packaging area and then out to shipping. When a line has to be shut down for cleaning, the curtain can be run out along the track that encircles the area. For an investment of less than $15,000, an area of thousands of square feet can be enclosed in different places at different times by a single separator curtain. Continually morphing product lines and on-going lean production programs require flexible equipment floor plans. This kind of thinking cannot be confined by walls. Taking down and reinstalling curtain tracks can enable track patterns to accommodate workflow and new equipment placement. Food curtains can be provided for any room height and to confine any size area. Curtain material can be

PVC, USDA grade PVC or antimicrobial PVC, thick enough to prevent tearing from passing vehicles or carts. The material should be transparent to allow light into the area for those performing the cleaning.

Added Benefits

Adjacent processing lines are not the only concern facing food processors when attempting to utilize floor space. The FDA will not allow processing to happen near storage areas. Food curtains can make a barrier between the processing lines and the racks, eliminating the creation of this "dead" area. Processing companies are always searching for ways to expand their run times, while at the same time trying to avoid expanding their floor area to meet increased sales and growing product lines. Vinyl food curtains provide a flexible answer. *Tony Goff is president of Goff's Enterprises Inc, 1228 Hickory St., Pewaukee, WI 53072. Goff Enterprises is a manufacturer of curtain walls for a variety of applications from painting areas and loading docks to insect control and safety screening. More information is available by calling 800-234-0337 or visiting www.goffscurtainwalls.com.*

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