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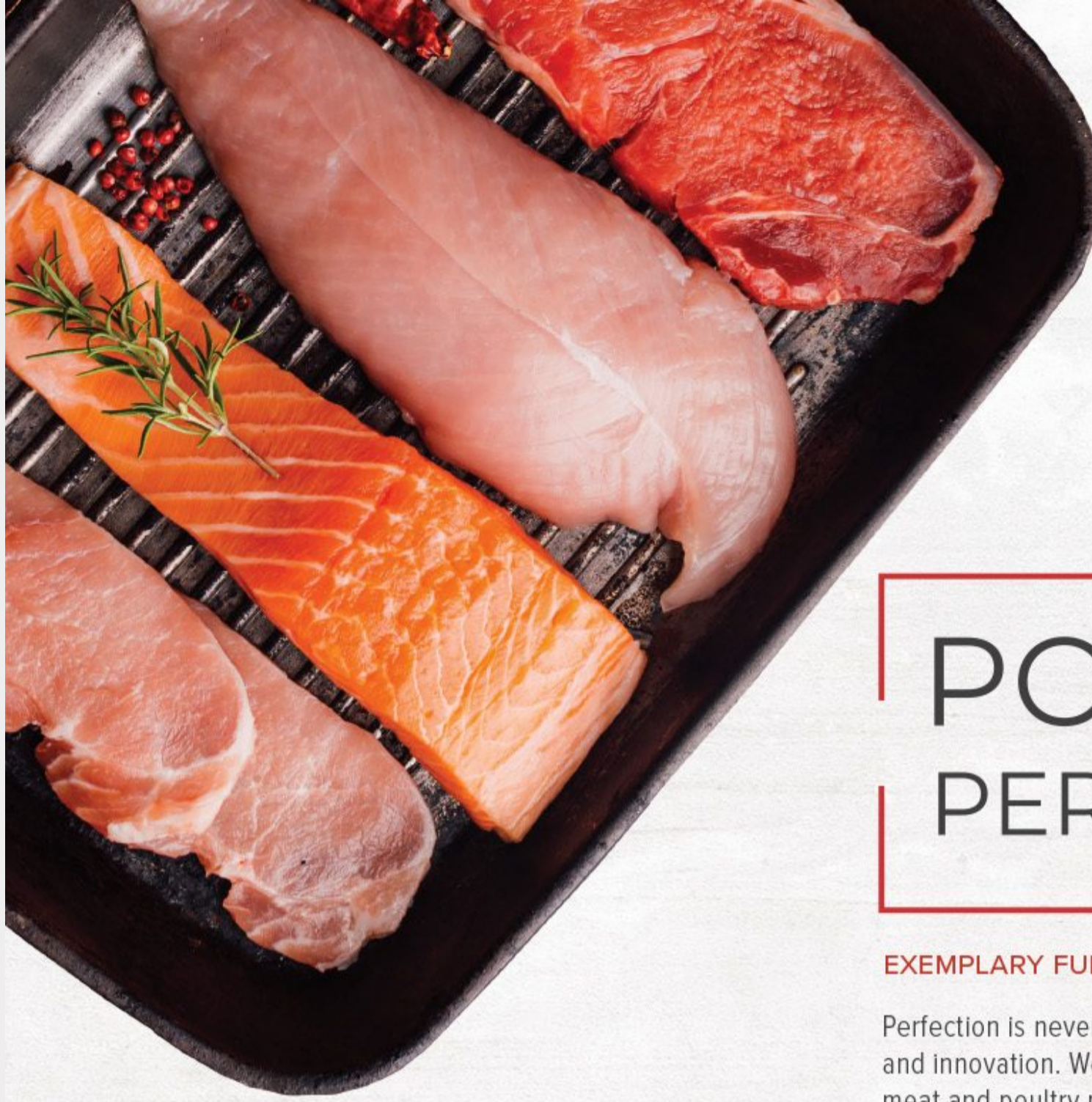


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with
MICHELLE LIESZKOVSKY
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HIGHLIGHTING BUTTERBALL'S COOK FROM FROZEN WHOLE TURKEY WITH HEAD OF INNOVATION MICHELLE LIESZKOVSKY

The National Provisioner Multimedia Specialist Brett Parker sits down with Michelle Lieszkovszky, head of innovation at Butterball, as they discuss the company's new Cook from Frozen whole turkey, a product that can be cooked as conveniently as possible without sacrificing any of the taste.

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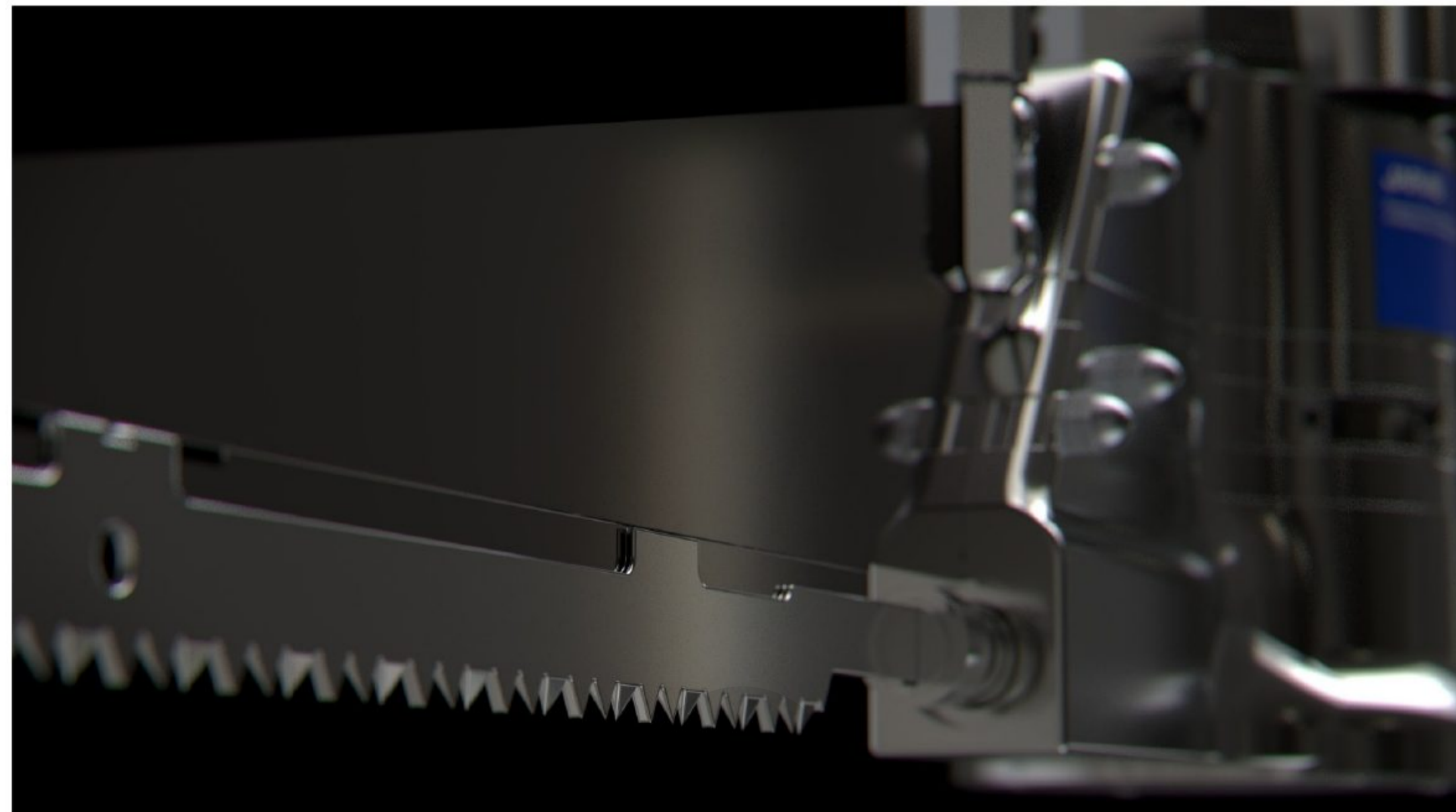
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HERE COMES 2025

Meat and poultry marketers have reason to be optimistic as the new year approaches – well, cautiously optimistic at least.

Inflation has receded to its lowest level since nearly four years ago, and wage increases have been outpacing inflation. Despite these encouraging developments, for low- to middle-income consumers the struggle is real. Prices for meat and poultry products (along with basically all other household essentials) are rising at a more modest clip, but they remain noticeably elevated compared with the pre-pandemic marketplace that feels increasingly remote from peoples' current economic situation.

Add to that the ongoing tight supply for beef that is forecast to continue throughout 2025, and it's clear that in spite of some positive trends for the economic outlook, the supply side will face some challenges in the coming year right along with consumers.

Take a look at our 2025 Economic Outlook Report for an overview of the forces impacting the market for protein products.

Also in this issue, don't miss our Processor Profiles on Northwest Meat Co., a Chicago-based company finding success catering to foodservice clients, and Nebraska-based Wahoo Locker.



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- **August 2025**
Feature Article and Digital Spotlight



INFLATIONARY HANGOVER PERSISTING FOR CONSUMERS



CONSUMERS IN THE LOW- TO MIDDLE-INCOME SEGMENT STRUGGLE TO COVER ESSENTIALS.

BY FRED WILKINSON
CHIEF EDITOR

Despite annual inflation recently receding to its lowest level since February 2021 and wage increases outpacing inflation, US consumers in the low- to middle-income brackets are struggling to cover essentials, including groceries. Essentials account for a larger share of low- and middle-income consumers' budgets, impacting their discretionary spending on food at home as well as dining out.

While rising prices have moderated, they are not declining, and consumers are paying higher prices for meat and poultry products. The average price per pound in the meat department across all cuts and kinds, both fixed and random weight, stood at \$4.67 in October 2024, up 1.9% year on year and up 11.5% from October 2021, according to Circana retail data analysis.

"Shoppers tell us that they remain concerned over inflation, with 62% saying they are extremely concerned," said Melissa Myres, director, insights, at market research firm 84.51°. Myres said the top three ways consumers are stretching their food dollar are looking for sales/deals/coupons more often (71%) cutting back on non-essentials (55%) and switching to a lower-cost brand more often (51%).

"While overall financial comfort is up versus a year ago, 21% of shoppers still say that are not comfortable at all with their finances," she said. "Of those not comfortable, they cite grocery prices, monthly bills and inflation as the top drivers."

In response to inflation, Myres said 40% of shoppers said they are going out and ordering food less and grocery shopping more. Additionally, 23% are buying less meat, fish or produce. When asked what percentage of the food they consumed was from, 75% said a store, 15% a restaurant (takeout, delivery or drive-through) and 8% a restaurant (eaten on site).

"Over the next few months, 48% of shoppers tell us that they plan to have more sit-down dinners at home," Myres said. The main factors consumers cited for the shift toward food at home are cost savings (81%), health benefits (50%), convenience (43%), quality of ingredients (37%) and timesavings (35%).

Among strategies meat and poultry marketers can leverage to appeal to value, Myres suggested increasing the variety and affordability of meal kits and grab-and-go options -- with attention to portion sizes and diversity -- to cater to different household sizes and dietary restrictions.

What consumer trends will mean for meat and poultry sales will vary by region, customer segment and occasion, said Rob Dongoski, global lead for food and agribusiness at Kearney, a strategy and management consulting firm.

"As beef prices continue upward and food prices continue to challenge consumers, there is likely a shift to lower cost protein options like poultry," Dongoski said, adding that consumers continue to perceive poultry as a healthier option than low-cost beef like burgers.

He said dietary trends for health-conscious consumers continue to trend toward higher protein, lower carb format, which will increase protein demand.



THE NATIONAL
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PODCAST

Karl McDermott, chief SaaS officer for cold chain integrity solutions provider DeltaTrak, shares supply chain insights on what meat and poultry product manufacturers and handlers can expect in the coming year.

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Dongoski sees the following on the horizon for protein markets in 2025:

- **Beef** – Low herd sizes and waning demand for low-end products will continue to keep the market in flux.
- **Pork** – Production is challenged due to demand factors – a) export demand primarily China and b) rise of millennial/Gen Z consumers who show little interest in pork.
- **Poultry** – Structurally stable, and demand continues to be strong. Disease outbreak (mostly HPAI) has become more common, and aggressive measures to prevent and isolate will be critical (especially with 2024 examples of HPAI being transmitted to both cattle and humans).

According to US Department of Agriculture forecasts, 2025 beef production will decline compared to 2024, with an estimated more than 26 billion pounds of beef expected to be produced. The decline is largely due to lower cattle inventories.

USDA forecasts that the poultry industry will experience steady growth in 2025, with production and exports projected to increase as broiler production reaches more than 47 billion pounds. Turkey production outlook projects 5.18 billion pounds of turkey produced in 2025.

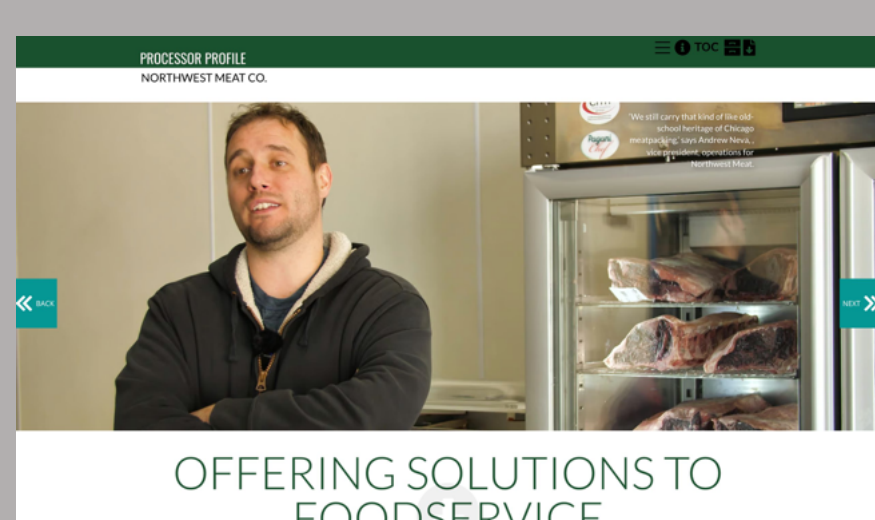
USDA projects global chicken meat exports will increase 2% in 2025, to 13.8 million tons, with Brazil expected to be a major contributor to growth due to its disease-free status, competitive pricing and export orientation.

USDA's 2025 pork forecast projects pork production will be around 28.5 billion pounds, a roughly 2% increase compared with 2024.

PRODUCTION EQUIPMENT TURNAROUND

According to PMMI, packaging machinery shipments in the US grew 5.8% in 2023 to \$10.9 billion. While that growth rate is forecast to slow to 2.5% for 2024, PMMI predicts 2025 will bring an upturn in sales growth rates, hitting a high of 8% in 2027. PMMI expects the slowdown in 2024 is the next low point in the industry's typical peak-to-trough sales cycle lasting three to five years.

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"We still carry that kind of like old-school heritage of Chicago meatpacking," says Andrew Neva, vice president, operations for Northwest Meat.

OFFERING SOLUTIONS TO FOODSERVICE FUELS GROWTH

CHICAGO-BASED WHOLESALE DISTRIBUTOR NORTHWEST MEAT FOCUSES ON NICHE PRODUCTS THAT CLIENTS CAN'T FIND ANYWHERE ELSE.

BY FRED WILKINSON
CHIEF EDITOR

With an exclusive focus on foodservice, Northwest Meat Co.'s clients run the gamut from high-end steakhouses to bar-and-grill operators.

"We sell beef, veal, lamb, pork and poultry," said Andrew Neva, vice president, operations for Northwest Meat. "We grind our own ground beef in-house, and we make our own homemade Italian sausage. We have a full portion control line of steaks. We'll do boxed beef or boxed meat distribution."

Northwest Meat is a family-owned-and-operated wholesale meat products fabricator and distributor on Chicago's west side. Founded in 1956 by a recent immigrant from Italy, Bruno Michelotti, Northwest Meat's ownership is currently in the third generation, split between Andrew and his mother Lori and father Stan.

"We still carry that kind of like old-school heritage of Chicago meatpacking," Andrew said. "We're still surviving out there after all these years."

The wholesale distributor's operations have scaled to 25 employees operating a 15,000-square-foot facility that focuses on foodservice clients including restaurants, hotels, country clubs and food institutions throughout the Chicago area and nationwide. Northwest Meat has six trucks to distribute throughout about a 75-mile radius around Chicago.

Posting about \$12 million a year in sales, Northwest Meat has grown by finding ways to add value for foodservice operators, such as cutting portion-control steaks.



"There's just no labor or skill to do that," Andrew said. "On the foodservice end, they need everything to come in ready to go, so all they have to do is open up a package."

Grinds have long been one of Northwest Meat's popular product offerings, with Andrew noting a market preference for more premium grinds such as the company's tri-blend of brisket, chuck and ribeye. Northwest Meat's burger line includes 4-, 6- and 8-ounce patties available in different blends.

"Maybe 40% of our business is grind, 30% of our business is your portion control, steak cutting. Then maybe like 15% poultry and then 15% boxed beef or just boxed meats distribution," Andrew said. "We do a full portion control line and also a dry age line. We don't do any cooking. We don't do any sort of further processing. We don't do any tumbling -- strictly raw meat and poultry."

Northwest Meat doesn't process poultry Andrew said, but it does resell parts.



Northwest Meat is a family-owned-and-operated wholesale meat products fabricator and distributor on Chicago's west side.

HOT PRODUCTS

To position itself for future growth, Northwest Meat is focusing on niche products that clients can't find anywhere else.

"I think that our biggest way where we can separate ourselves is just focus on niche products," Andrew said. "There are things we can do that larger organizations can't do, and I think we need to try to position ourselves to try in a heavily consolidated industry to find a way to be different."

Three Northwest Meat products in particular have enjoyed accelerated growth.

One is Certified Piedmontese beef, which Northwest Meat sources from a Nebraska supplier. Piedmontese cattle originate from the Piedmontese region in Italy. The product is grown without antibiotics or growth-promoting hormones, and there's no corn in the animals' diet.

"It's grown on hay, alfalfa and barley," Andrew said. "It's double-muscle cattle. There's more lean-to-fat ratio. You're going to get a leaner product that is going to not have all those fibers and connective tissue that would make that product tough. You could put a prime steak and a Piedmontese next to each other and the tenderness will be exactly the same."

He said Certified Piedmontese beef also is higher in healthful omega 3 fatty acids. "What we're finding is that as consumers are looking for just a different style of beef than the standard American commodity-grown, this product is fantastic. It has really helped drive our sales."

The second strong seller for Northwest Meat is Winston-Salem, N.C.-based Joyce Farms' Poulet Rouge chicken, a red-feathered French chicken with a long neck.

"The Poulet Rouge chicken is a twelve-week-old chicken," Andrew said. "It is a true free-roaming chicken, so after four weeks of age it actually does roam on natural grass. What makes it unique is that with it being older, you have longer flavor development. That is a very niche-y kind of chicken that we've had some pretty good success with here because nothing tastes like it."

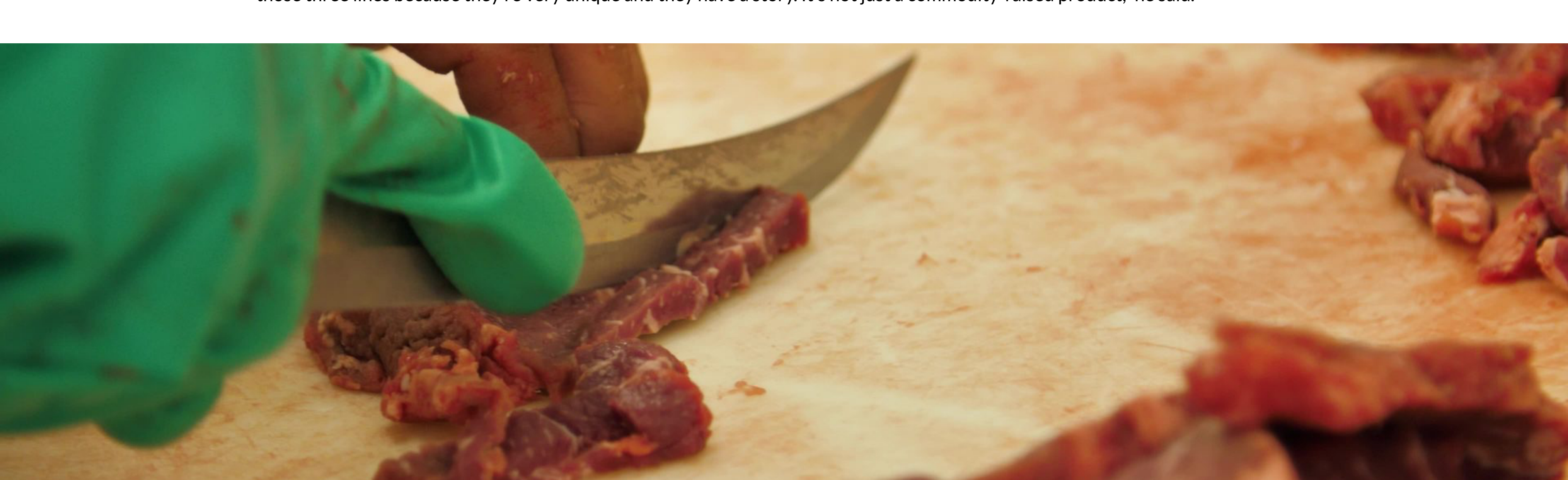
Poulet Rouge chicken has a more forward, intense flavor, with much darker meat, Andrew said. "Even the breasts are much darker. It's also very, very thin-skinned, so when you cook it, you want to cook it at a high heat so the skin gets nice and crispy"

He said what Joyce Farms does differently is dry-age their birds 24 hours before processing. "What that does is it dries out the bird, concentrates the flavor," he said.

Another hot item for Northwest Meats is Elysian Farms lamb, produced in western Pennsylvania.

"They use a lot of science, and they use a lot of data where they know every single aspect that goes into the lamb. You will not find a better lamb product. This lamb is incredible. I've never tasted anything like it," Andrew said.

"I got Joyce, Elysian and Certified Piedmontese -- If you look at where are we getting our growth, we're trying to get it through those three lines because they're very unique and they have a story. It's not just a commodity-raised product," he said.



Northwest Meat has grown by finding ways to add value for foodservice operators, such as cutting portion-control steaks.

EFFICIENCY UPGRADES

When it comes to automation, Northwest Meat remains very much a hands-on operation.

"That is one of the biggest challenges that we face, Andrew said. "Everything we do is either ground, cut, sliced, diced or boned, all by hand. We still rely on skilled butchers."

Although Northwest Meat has added some automation enhancements for packaging -- including a roll stock machine -- like many small- to mid-sized processors, the company has had to contend with the scarcity and high cost of labor, Andrew said. Northwest Meat has tackled this challenge by automating as many processes as possible within their facility and in the back-office. Northwest Meat recently starting to use Choco AI to automate their order processing. The system helps track customer ordering. "It cuts down on mistakes because at the end of the day, if the customer orders it, it's going through. It takes us out of the equation," Andrew said.

All images credit: Northwest Meat Co.





MAXIMIZING COLD STORAGE, LOGISTICS ROI

SMALL MEAT AND POULTRY PROCESSORS ARE OFTEN LOOKING TO MAXIMIZE THEIR INVESTMENT IN REFRIGERATED AND FROZEN STORAGE CAPACITY.

BY SAMMY BREDAR
ASSOCIATE GROUP EDITOR

A recent rise in food recalls had led to increasing scrutiny on preventing foodborne pathogens in meat and poultry products. To help ensure product safety and quality, meat and poultry processors can take steps to optimize their cold storage, logistics and transportation efforts.

COLD STORAGE

Small meat and poultry processors in particular may struggle to balance their facility space between production and storage. Because of this, small processors are often looking to maximize their investment in refrigerated and frozen storage capacity. Charles Betts, national sales manager for Interstate Cold Storage, noted how essential this balancing act is. "Production makes money, and storage costs money," Betts said.

To optimize the facility space, Betts said small producers can utilize third-party cold storage to store product offsite.

To optimize the production space, Betts recommends investing in a high-quality cold storage system on site. "These units are weather resistant, standalone systems and the longevity of the product, as well as cooling efficiency costs are the two main factors to consider when making a purchase," Betts said.

During storage, processors must consider not only how their product will be stored, but how it will be loaded into the walk-in. "That information is vital," said Polar King Regional Sales Manager Dan Parsenow. "You want to buy a unit you can grow into, but you don't want it too big that you are conditioning extra space. Will the product be coming in frozen or are you needing to freeze it in the walk-in?"

To protect the cold chain, processors can tailor their handling efforts. Parsenow recommends handling the product as little as possible to keep temperature consistent. "For distribution, product should be transferred via a refrigerated truck or trailer with cold sticks or temperature monitoring/recording."

Ensuring product safety and quality is essential. To do so, meat and poultry processors can utilize temperature monitoring and automatic recording, as well as redundant refrigeration, Parsenow said. Betts noted that multiroom facilities can provide an added benefit for processors, since products can be stored together at a consistent preset temperature. "The cold chain's two most critical control points are temperature and efficiency in handling," Betts said.

Betts noted how essential it is to move finished goods from the production area to a separate area—this is vital to pathogen mitigation. "Just like the production lines should be segregated by ingredients used on that line, finished goods need to be put in the finished area as efficiently as possible," Betts said.

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LOGISTICS, TRANSPORTATION

Often dealing with tightened wallets in today's economic climate, meat and poultry processors need to make sure any investment has a strong return on investment. When considering an investment in logistics solutions or services, small processors especially need to keep a close eye on ROI.

"When evaluating the ROI of logistics solutions, the challenge is to capture indirect impacts in addition to direct," said Hillary McCutcheon, chief marketing officer of PLA. "For example, simply comparing the up-front cost of solutions can lead to an inaccurate view of ROI if the impact on labor, space utilization, transportation, and process efficiency aren't captured."

To maximize a logistics investment, meat processors should seek out a solutions provider who understands both direct and indirect ROI.

Joel Gard, CEO of Sheer Logistics, recommends small meat processors optimize a logistics investment by partnering with a transportation-focused 3PL or a 4PL/Managed Transportation Services provider that offers a SaaS-based Transportation Management System.

"With the support of a logistics service provider, processors can benefit from consolidating shipments, negotiating better carrier rates, and leveraging data analytics to reduce transportation costs and increase visibility, which is crucial for efficiently managing perishables," Gard said.



Sheer corporate office. Courtesy of Sheer Logistics

Just like cold storage, third-party services for logistics are becoming an increasingly attractive option to meat processors. 3PLs and 4PLs can help processors not only deal with labor shortages, but control costs as well. "Outsourcing logistics helps processors maintain efficient operations without increasing in-house staffing, allowing them to scale more flexibly in response to fluctuating labor conditions and demand surges," Gard said.

Flexibility is essential in today's food production industry. Artificial intelligence is becoming increasingly common in logistics services, as it allows operators the flexibility to adapt to an extremely dynamic industry.

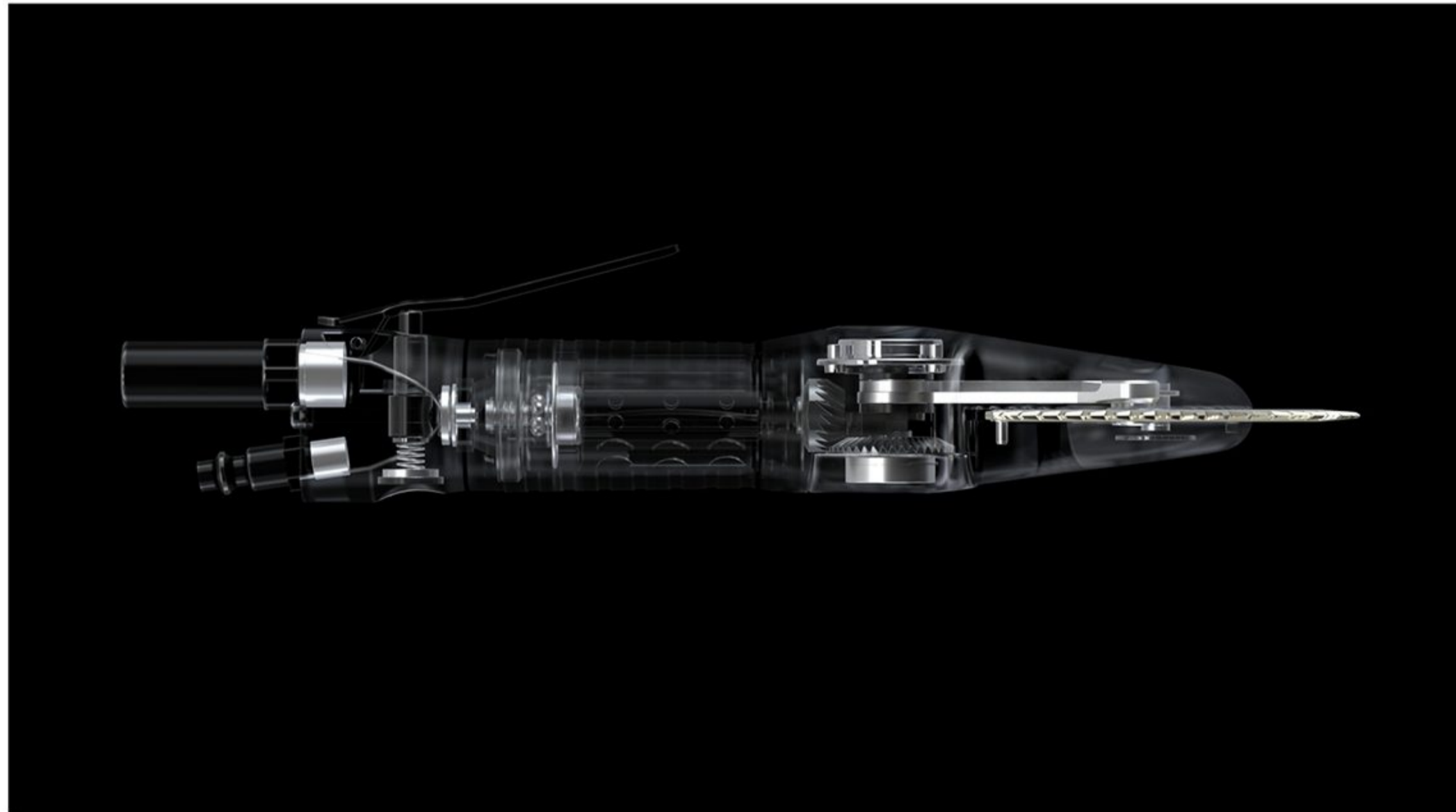
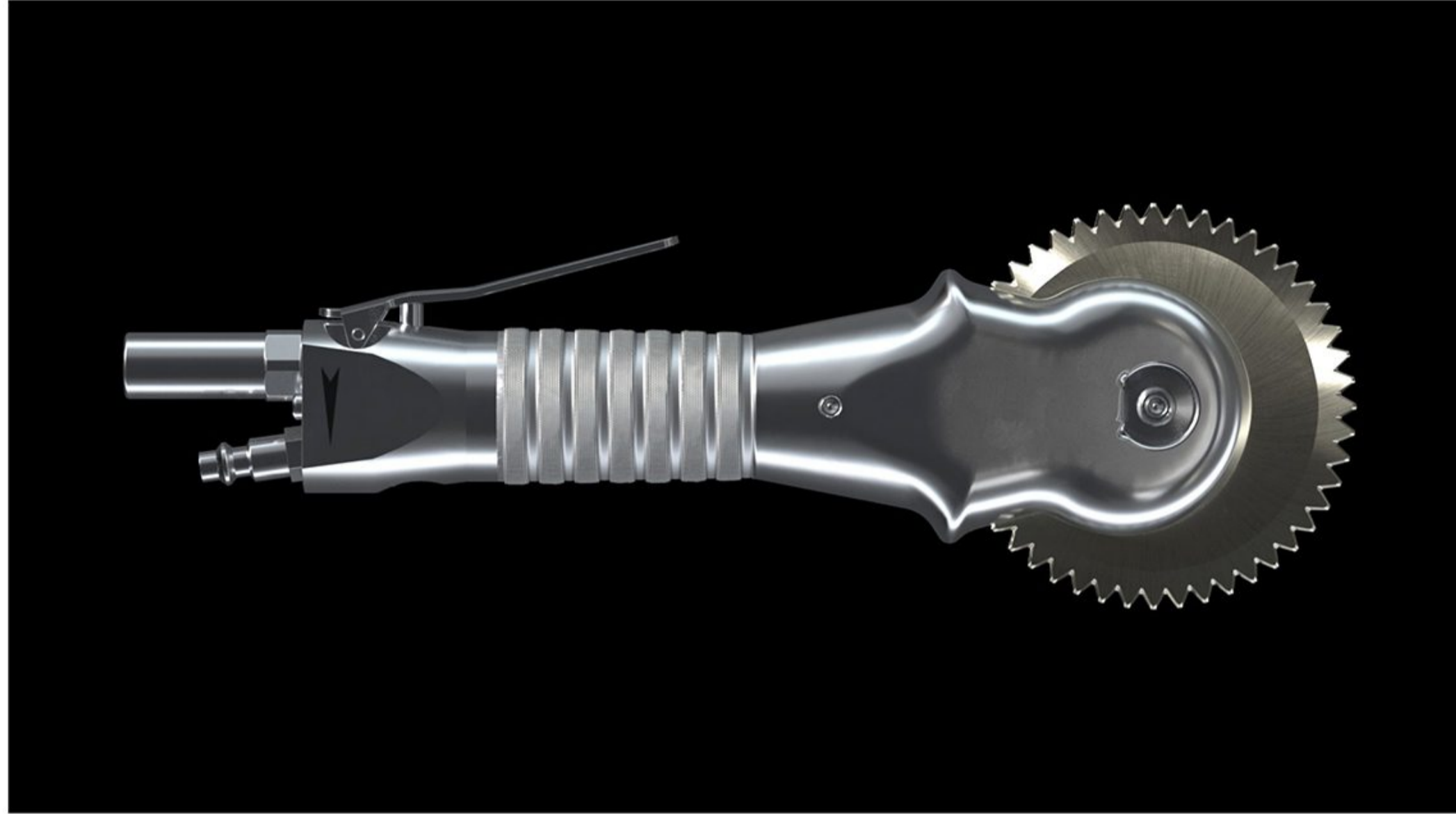
AI-driven insights are clearly benefiting the supply chain, streamlining data for businesses and improving demand forecasting, as well as inventory management, McCutcheon said. "This allows for better planning, reducing risk that minor disruptions or changes in demand will result in costly production or distribution issues," McCutcheon said.

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WHAT'S IN STORE FOR SALMONELLA IN 2025?

INCOMING TRUMP ADMINISTRATION WILL LIKELY TAKE MORE OF A HANDS-OFF APPROACH WHEN IT COMES TO EXPANSIVE REGULATION.

BY SHAWN K. STEVENS
FOOD INDUSTRY COUNSEL LLC

During the pendency of President Joe Biden's first and only four years in the White House, USDA announced many new regulatory and other initiatives designed to control *Salmonella* in USDA regulated foods. This included the historic pronouncement in 2023, finalized in 2024, that not ready-to-eat raw breaded stuffed chicken products (containing *Salmonella* at levels of 1 Colony Forming Unit per gram) would be deemed adulterated. Industry was aware for years that new *Salmonella* rules were coming, but it was nevertheless a surprise when they were announced.

To industry's greater surprise in August 2004, USDA unexpectedly went even further, announcing that raw poultry carcasses and parts would also be deemed to be adulterated if they were found to contain any *Salmonella* above certain thresholds, and any detectable level of certain *Salmonella* serotypes that have already been deemed by the agency to represent a significant risk to public health. This rule remains in draft form, and whether it eventually becomes published as a final binding rule remains to be seen.

While both anti-*Salmonella* initiatives were fully expected by USDA to further strengthen the overall safety of the nation's food supply, and thus decrease overall annual trends of *Salmonella* illnesses nationwide, it is not unreasonable to query whether the later proposed rule will ever come into fruition. Namely, this is because when the political winds change, the prevailing regulatory winds in many cases will change as well.

While the Biden administration was a stalwart supporter of new food safety initiatives, and supported many new, emerging, and novel rules and regulations, with the change of any administration, changes agency policies will invariably occur. In turn, we predict that President Trump will likely take more of a hands-off approach when it comes to expansive regulation, and seek, instead, to find more ways to loosen existing regulations and allow industry more flexibility to govern itself.

In addition, with the Supreme Court's recent decision in *Loper Bright* (overturning the historical *Chevron* deference the courts used to be required to give to agencies when it comes to statutory and regulatory interpretation), legal challenges to administrative actions are now more likely than they were previously. Indeed, USDA even anticipated such potential challenges when it published the proposed rule, stating that the agency intends each portion of the new rule to be "severable," such that, if any portion of the rule were to be set aside or overturned by a reviewing court, it would be the agency's intent that the remainder of the rule would remain in effect.

So, will *Salmonella* officially become an adulterant in raw poultry carcasses and parts during Trump's second and final term? Some might say "yes," arguing that there is no way any administration would walk back a rule designed to increase food safety and decrease foodborne illnesses. But, others, might say "no," there is no viable or economical solution to the broader *Salmonella* in poultry problem, and that industry should be given a reprieve.

While the administration will not want to take any actions perceived as adversely affecting food safety, it will also likely want to protect industry from onerous and arguably unreasonable regulatory burden. So, like you, we will be watching over the course of the coming months to see if USDA's new proposed *Salmonella* rule survives the change in presidential leadership, and the policy changes which inevitably follow.

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BY GWEN VENABLE
USPOULTRY

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IPPE education programs are scheduled from Monday, Jan. 27, to Friday, Jan. 31, with more than 80 hours of sessions led by industry experts and thought leaders. You can look forward to annual favorites, such as the Latin American Poultry Summit, the International Poultry Scientific Forum, the Pet Food Conference, and the International Rendering Symposium. Additionally, explore new sessions, including the Meat Institute Foreign Material Workshop, the Automation & Artificial Intelligence Workshop, the American Feed Industry Association Feed Education Program, the Animal Agriculture Sustainability Summit, the Poultry Market Intelligence Forum, and the Women's Meat Industry Network program. Detailed descriptions of all educational offerings are provided inside.



IPPE would like to extend a special thank you to our sponsors, whose support makes it possible for qualified attendees from member companies of all three associations engaged in the production of poultry, eggs and meat for consumption, production of feed, and for pet food manufacturers to attend complimentary. The Members to Atlanta program (M2A) is generously supported by IPPE elite exhibiting companies: Arm & Hammer, Booth A501; Aviagen Inc., Booth B7033; CEVA Animal Health, Booth B16009; Cobb, Booth B7007; Elanco Animal Health, Booth B25033; Heat and Control, Booth C37131; Kemin Industries Inc., Booth A1825 and C27155; US Soybean Export Council, Booth A1817; US SOY, Booth A1813; and Zoetis, Booth B19021. We sincerely appreciate these companies ongoing commitment to the M2A program and encourage you to visit their booths to see their latest products and services.

IPPE attendee activities include the TECHTalks, New Product Showcase, and the Happy Hour and Taste of IPPE to be held on the trade show floor. Attendees can also connect with future industry leaders through the College Student Career Program, which brings in around 700 college students each year, and the IPPE Young Leaders Under 30 Award, with the awards being presented in the Discovery Zone on the trade show floor at 10 a.m. on Wednesday, Jan. 29. Mark your calendars to stop by and help celebrate the best of the next generation in the poultry and egg, meat and animal food industries!

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NATIONAL BEEF TENDERNESS SURVEY

HIGHLIGHTS THE IMPORTANCE OF TENDERNESS FOR CONSUMER SATISFACTION

RETAIL AND FOODSERVICE STEAKS GENERALLY MEET CONSUMER EXPECTATIONS FOR TENDERNESS AND SENSORY ATTRIBUTES, SURVEY SUGGESTS.

GONZALEZ, A. A., WILLIAMS, E. P., SCHWARTZ, T. E., ARNOLD, A. N., GRIFFIN, D. B., MILLER, R. K., GEHRING, K. B., BROOKS, J. C., LEGAKO, J. F., CARR, C. C., MAFI, G. G., LORENZEN, C. L., MADDOCK, R. J. & SAVELL, J. W., (2024) "NATIONAL BEEF TENDERNESS SURVEY—2022: CONSUMER SENSORY PANEL EVALUATIONS AND WARNER-BRATZLER SHEAR FORCE OF BEEF STEAKS FROM RETAIL AND FOODSERVICE", MEAT AND MUSCLE BIOLOGY 8(1): 16997, 1-11. DOI: [HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.22175/MMB.16997](https://doi.org/10.22175/MMB.16997)

The National Beef Tenderness Survey (NBTS) 2022 is a comprehensive study conducted to assess beef palatability, focusing on tenderness and consumer sensory evaluations of retail and foodservice steaks. This survey, the sixth of its kind over the past three decades, continues to be a crucial resource for the beef industry, documenting changes in steak tenderness and consumer preferences.

The 2022 survey aimed to benchmark the tenderness of beefsteaks and evaluate sensory attributes using Warner-Bratzler shear (WBS) force analysis and consumer sensory panels. The study also sought to gather data on branding, marketing claims, and quality grades of beef products. Unlike previous surveys, the 2022 study excluded round steaks so that we could concentrate our work on those middle meat cuts where tenderness contributes more to their acceptance. Tenderloin steaks were reintroduced to examine whether they were "too tender" and to compare their tenderness with other cuts.

Retail and foodservice steaks were sampled from 11 and six US cities, respectively, covering a broad geographical range. Retail steaks included top blade, ribeye, top loin, T-bone, Porterhouse, top sirloin, and tenderloin cuts. Foodservice steaks were ribeye, top sirloin, top loin, and tenderloin, with quality grades ranging from Prime to Select. The steaks were prepared and cooked using standardized protocols to ensure consistency in evaluations.

TENDERNESS MEASUREMENTS

- Retail steaks: Tenderloin steaks had the lowest WBS force values, indicating superior tenderness. The top sirloin had the highest WBS force value, making it the least tender among retail cuts. Most retail steaks, including top blade, bone-in ribeye, Porterhouse, and tenderloin, were categorized as "very tender" (<31.4 N). The top sirloin was the only cut that had samples categorized as "tough" (>45.1 N). The retail top sirloin steak was the only cut that fell into the "tough" (>45.1 N) category and had the highest percentage in the "intermediate" (38.3 N < WBS < 45.1 N) grouping.
- Foodservice steaks: Tenderloin and top sirloin cuts had the lowest WBS force values, while ribeye and top loin cuts showed higher values. Ribeye steaks had a notable decrease in the percentage of steaks classified as "very tender" compared to previous surveys, possibly due to thinner cuts, resulting in faster cooking times.

CONSUMER SENSORY EVALUATIONS

- Retail steaks: Tenderloin steaks received the highest ratings across all sensory attributes, including overall like/dislike, tenderness, flavor, and juiciness. Our purpose for including the tenderloin steak in this survey was to see whether, in fact, that with improvements in tenderness we have observed in other rib and loin steaks over the years, it could now be "too tender." These sensory panel ratings certainly do not reflect any such problem with the tenderloin steak. After the tenderloin steak and for the overall like/dislike ratings, the remaining steaks were within 0.4 units, many of which overlapped in their lack of significant differences. This should not be a surprise considering that these steaks should be more similar than different in palatability.
- Foodservice steaks: No significant differences were found among foodservice steak cuts regarding sensory ratings for overall like/dislike, tenderness, flavor, and juiciness. This lack of significant differences is consistent with the most recent past survey. Even with so many studies that show the positive influence of marbling and/or grade on beef palatability, there were no (P > 0.05) differences between USDA quality grade groups.

BRANDING AND CLAIMS

There was a noticeable increase in branding and marketing claims on retail steak packages compared to previous surveys. About 66.4% of retail packages and 40.7% of foodservice packages featured branding or claims. This increase reflects growing consumer interest in product provenance and quality.

CONCLUSION

The NBTS 2022 highlights several key trends and outcomes: Retail steaks are generally very tender, with improvements in tenderness across various cuts compared to earlier surveys. Foodservice ribeye and top loin show a trend towards increased WBS force values, which could be attributed to changes in steak thickness and cooking practices. However, this increase did not impact consumer sensory ratings of the product.

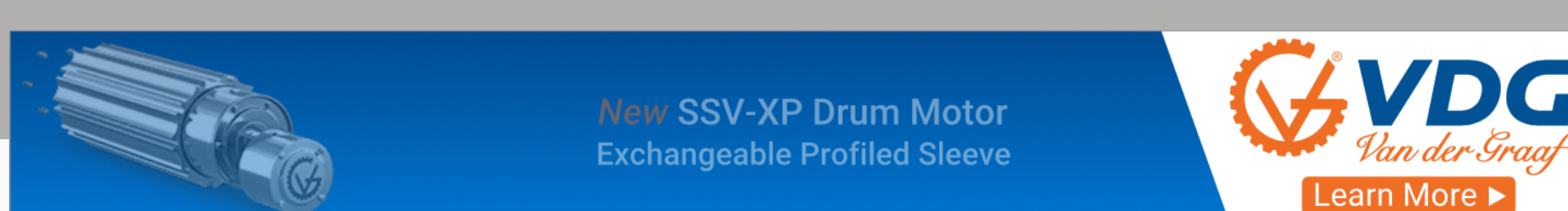
Similar WBS values and consumer sensory panel ratings for foodservice steaks across USDA quality grades could be attributed to Low Choice and Select steaks performing quite well, instead of Prime and Top Choice steaks underperforming. Foodservice steaks receiving high consumer sensory ratings and WBS values deemed to be tender, regardless of USDA quality grade, is an outcome that benefits many sectors of the beef industry.

The rise in product branding and marketing claims reflects a shift toward greater consumer awareness and interest in beef quality.

Overall, the 2022 survey emphasizes that both retail and foodservice steaks generally meet consumer expectations for tenderness and sensory attributes, despite some variations in WBS force values. The findings provide valuable insights into the beef industry, highlighting the importance of maintaining high standards of tenderness and consumer satisfaction.

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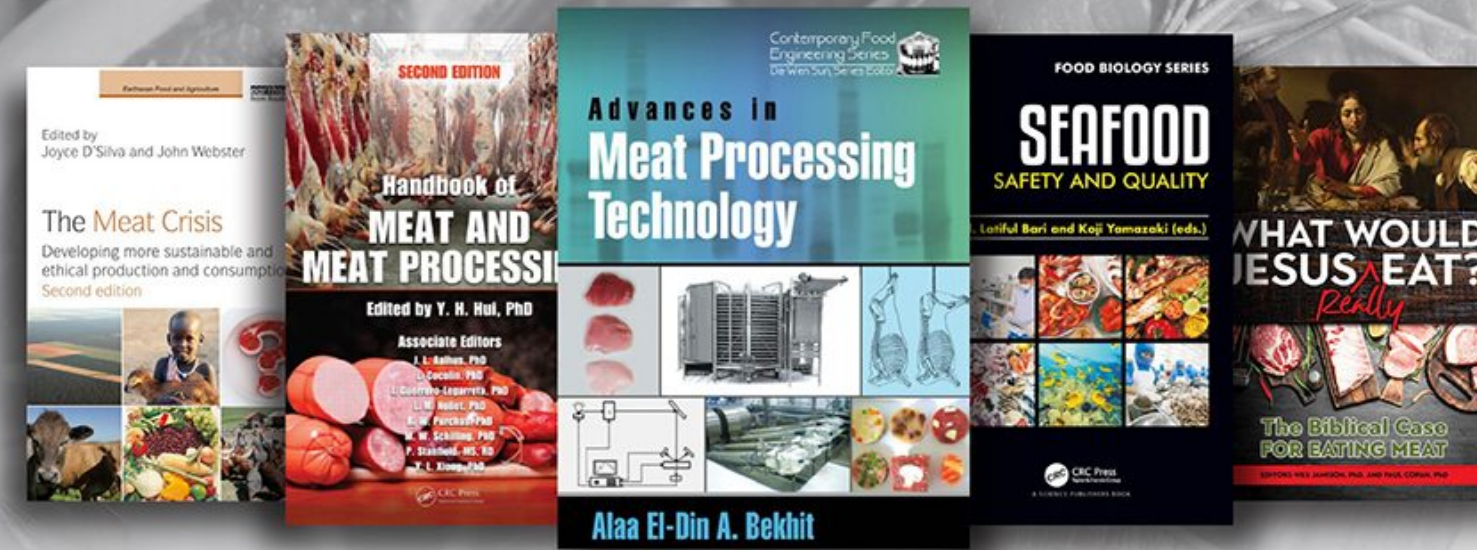
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CHECKING BACK IN WITH WAHOO LOCKER

NEBRASKA-BASED WAHOO LOCKER REBUILDS AND THRIVES AFTER FACING TRAGEDY IN 2013.

BY SAMMY BREDAR
ASSOCIATE GROUP EDITOR

Family-owned meat processing company Wahoo Locker not only processes a variety of meats including beef, pork and wild game, but the company also sells its own products and cooking items at its own retail store. Based in Wahoo, Neb., Wahoo Locker is both family owned and family operated.

Known as the “Home of the Wahoo Wiener,” Wahoo Locker was founded many years before the current owners, the Emswiler family, took over. In 1998, Charlie and Kristi Emswiler purchased Wahoo Locker and successfully ran it for 15 years before tragedy struck in 2013. That year, the company faced an unforeseen hurdle when their facility burned down. Thankfully, no one was injured in the fire.

We last spoke with Wahoo Locker in 2015, two years after the grease fire that destroyed the original Wahoo Locker operations. Luckily, the Emswiler family was already planning on expanding Wahoo Locker and had previously purchased a 17,000-square-foot building next to the original operations.



Wahoo Locker retail store



Emswiler family

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In the face of the tragedy of the fire, the Emswilers were forced to pivot production to the newly purchased building. Despite this roadblock, which stalled production for five months, Wahoo Locker came back stronger than ever.

Originally, Charlie Emswiler worried that the new space would be too large for Wahoo Locker. “We’ve since then added on three times,” Emswiler said. “We are basically almost maxing out our facility now.”

The new facility allowed the Emswiler family to greatly expand their retail storefront, featuring products made on site at Wahoo Locker. This facility also opened the way for federal inspection, resulting in a new private-label customer base.

“With our retail store, we have added some satellite stores throughout Nebraska, which has really helped us to grow a lot on retail side,” Emswiler said.

“Over the last 12 months, we did add four full retail stores, one in Omaha, Neb., one in Lincoln, Neb., one in Fremont, Neb., and one in Grand Island, Neb., so that’s been a huge step up for our retail. Getting our products close to 70% of the population in Nebraska, that’s been a huge push for us.”



Wahoo Locker seasonings



Charlie Emswiler at the Wahoo Locker retail store

Emswiler noted that, though there are many good meat processors out there, Wahoo Locker prides itself on quality. He noted how diverse the company is, pointing to its retail store and kitchen store, as well as full-service catering services.

Wahoo Locker further differentiates itself with various state and national awards in cured meats competitions. While each award is special to Emswiler, he particularly values any awards won by his family.

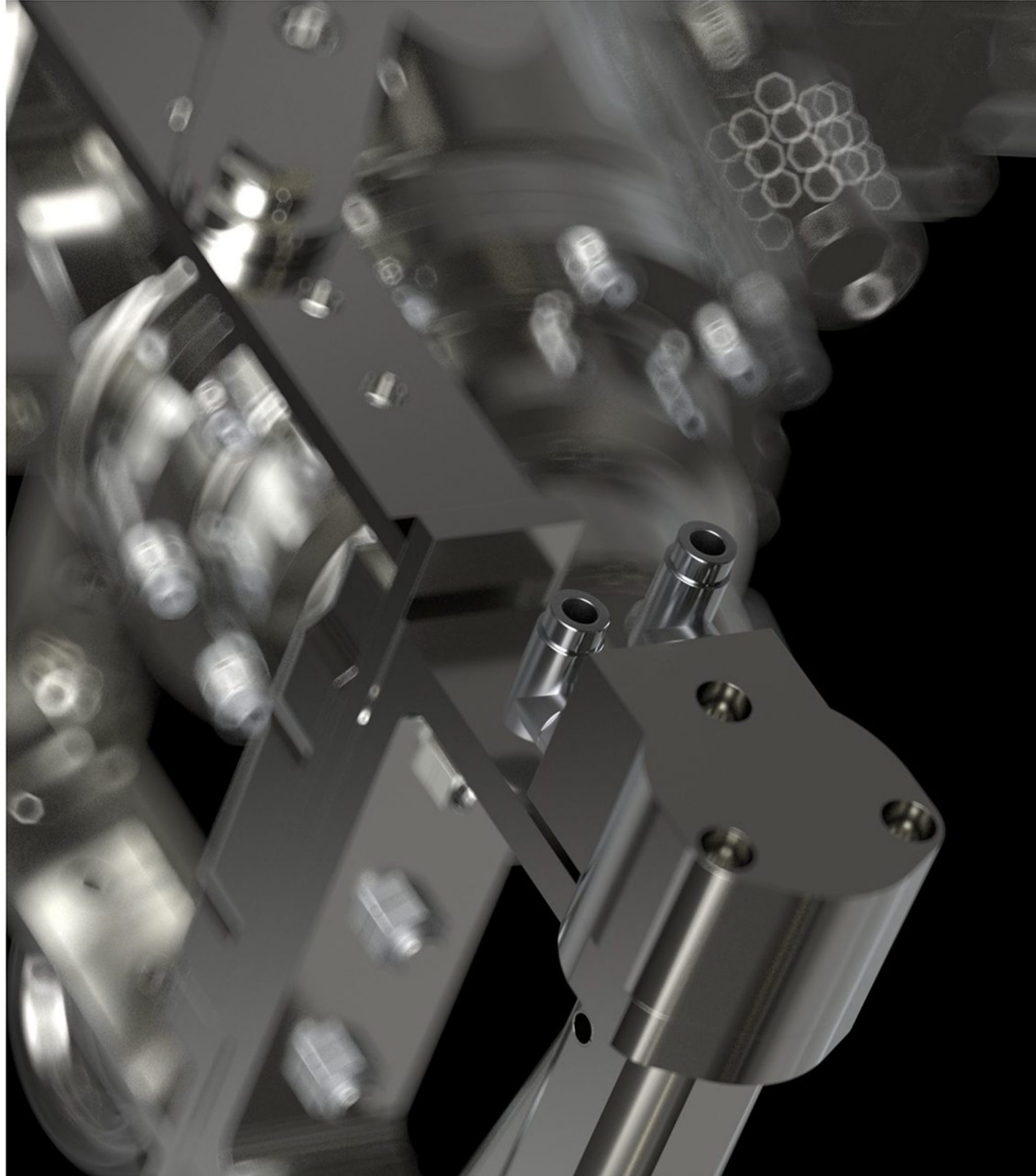
“We’ve won many awards over the years,” Emswiler said. “Probably in the last three or four years, my son took over the sausage kitchen. So any awards now that we win are probably more important to me than the other ones, because it’s him doing it himself, learning.”

The next Emswiler generation currently works at Wahoo Locker, learning the ins and outs of the family business.

All image credits: Wahoo Locker

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FLEXIBILITY AND AFFORDABILITY BUOY PORK

THROUGH THE FIRST THREE QUARTERS OF 2024, PORK EXPORTS WERE RUNNING 5% ABOVE 2023'S PACE.

BY FRED WILKINSON
CHIEF EDITOR

From October 2023 through October 2024, fresh pork sales reached \$8.4 billion, up 3.4% in dollar sales and up 0.7% in pounds sold compared with year-ago sales, according to Circana retail sales data analysis. For the same timeframe, total fresh meat sales hit \$72.2 billion, with dollar sales going up 6.4% and pounds sold growing by 2.9%.

Fresh pork sales averaged \$3.15 per pound in October 2024, down by -1.2% compared with October 2023 prices. For the 52-week period from October 2022 to October 2024, fresh pork prices averaged \$3.19 per pound, up 2.7% from a year ago

PORK EXPORTS ON RECORD PACE

Pork exports are on pace to set records for annual volume and value, according to USDA data compiled by the US Meat Export Federation. September 2024 exports of US pork grew year over year, totaling 238,047 metric tons (up 8% from a year ago). Pork export value increased 6%, to more than \$685 million. Through the first three quarters of 2024, pork exports were running 5% above 2023's pace at 2.23 million metric tons, with value up 7% to \$6.36 billion.

To address declining domestic pork demand among younger consumers, the National Pork Board's board of directors earlier in 2024 launched a plan leveraging insights from NPB consumer research and segmentation data that finds three key areas of focus to drive growth:

- taste and flavor
- balance (nutrition and versatility in meals)
- convenience (easy, delicious options).

While NPB aims to make pork products more relevant and relatable to consumers, marketers are looking at different types of premiumization regarding pork cuts, especially targeting holiday eating occasions, said Patricia Bridges, senior director of marketing and communications for Coleman All Natural Meats.

"People are looking for something special to serve to family and guests," Bridges said. "Some of these cuts are the long bone pork chops and the Frenched pork rib rack."

Bridges said consumers are looking for a broad range of product sizes in an effort to manage their budgets and minimize food waste, which is why Coleman All Natural Meats recently launched 8-ounce packages of bacon.

"As the cost of groceries continue to rise, pork is a cost-effective and versatile protein option that consumers are continuing to consider as part of their weekly meal preparation and planning," she said. "Combined with familiar cuts, quick cook time and robust flavor, pork provides the perfect balance of budget and nutrition for price-conscious consumers."



Photo credit: Coleman All Natural Meats

FOODSERVICE TRENDS FOR PORK

Coleman All Natural Meats is in the foodservice space with their bacon, sausage and fresh pork items, Bridges said.

With foodservice operators prioritizing efficiency with time, resources and staffing, foodservice-focused marketer Smithfield Culinary has developed its Smoke'NFast line of fully cooked menu offerings.

"Using Smoke'NFast fully cooked items, operators can provide their patrons with exceptional dining experiences while reducing back-of-house labor costs," said Samuel Wallis, senior corporate chef for Smithfield Culinary. "Additionally, the new Smithfield Select Bacon product line elevates the expected flavor and quality with a fully cooked option to save costs."

Wallis said Smithfield Culinary's Smoke'NFast portfolio is designed to bring authentic slow-cooked barbecue flavor that is ready in minutes. "The well-developed assortment of fully cooked and/or smoked products is designed to bring delicious smoked flavors that are heat-and-serve ready to ease labor concerns in the back of the house," he said.

Wallis said some of the current trends in culinary start in foodservice with chefs creating dishes by elevating ingredients to unique usages.

"In following those trends, Smithfield Culinary has regularly partnered with national foodservice operators to develop limited-time offers to showcase the versatility of the products, such as new ham usage occasions, innovative pepperoni, and flavor enhancements," he said. "As the increased interest in sauces continues, the interest in pork also rises with it being a highly functional flavor conduit. Within the Smithfield Culinary portfolio, creative and explorative spices are on par with current trends from sweet to spicy bacon options, and the ever-popular global flavorings such as carnitas and barbacoa to bring the right blend of seasonings and authentic flavor to chefs and operators."

Opening photo credit: Coleman All Natural Meats

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TIGHT SUPPLIES, HIGH PRICES PLAGUE SMALL PROCESSORS

SMALL MEAT AND POULTRY PROCESSORS GET CREATIVE TO ADJUST TO A DIFFICULT ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT.

BY SAMMY BREDAR
ASSOCIATE GROUP EDITOR

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For small processors looking to expand in the coming year, there are clear growth opportunities within the local food movement. Young noted that the local food movement first started ramping up when he joined AAMP in 2015, and the movement has not showed signs of slowing down.

"I don't think that the farm-to-table movement is going away," Young said. "I think that with the younger generation wanting to know especially where their food is coming from, there's a lot more people buying local. That's pushed business back. I think that opportunity is still there for the small processors."

The challenge for small processors is offering a quality product at a price consumers can afford. At the same time, processors need to charge enough to set off rising costs for labor and production. Young noted that, currently, the trajectory of the economy is not sustainable for many small meat and poultry processors.

LABOR OUTLOOK

Another persistent challenge for processors is acquiring and maintaining a solid labor force. "That's just really about putting warm bodies in to do something," Young said. "That's not even talking about the challenge of finding skilled labor."

While labor has always been a challenge for the meat and poultry industries, every segment of the food industry is now facing labor shortages and challenges. "I don't see it changing much," Young said. "It's going to be a challenge, and it will continue to be a challenge."

In today's economic environment, paying workers can be difficult enough, let alone offering benefits. Young said that AAMP as an organization is trying to help its members think outside the box when considering potential employee benefits.

"Maybe you're going to pay them X amount an hour, but you also offer them the opportunity to buy some of their meat and poultry at wholesale prices," Young said. "So that they can put food on the table at a reduced cost to them, rather than buying it at regular price in the grocery store."

By getting creative with employee retention efforts, processors can stay competitive in a difficult economic climate.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Despite persistent challenges, the meat and poultry industries continue to thrive in the face of adversity. State and federal funding can help small meat and poultry processors bolster their operations, enabling growth, expansion and new market access.

Although various state and federal programs offer funding to small processors, Young said he would like to see more federal funding opportunities consistently available.

"The grants that have come out since Covid have taken care of a handful, but it has nowhere near covered what would be needed," Young said.

"It would be nice to see a number of years here of ongoing grants so that different plants could take advantage of that and be able to use some of that grant money to expand their businesses or bring in automation and those different types of things that will help them to produce more and provide more for their local markets," Young said. "Because the fact is, a lot of our folks are in small towns in rural America, and they're the ones that are feeding that community. If you can add on or automate to be able to reduce your costs, then it makes it better for everybody."

REGULATORY ISSUES

As we approach 2025, poultry processors in particular are keeping an eye on the Salmonella proposed rule, and meat and poultry processors both large and small are anxiously awaiting the EPA wastewater final rule.

"They said it's going to be out by the end of the year, but we haven't heard anything," Young said. "We're not sure what affect the Supreme Court Chevron ruling will have on that final rule or any other final rules or regulatory things coming down the line from some of the agencies."

Opening image credit: Fred Wilkinson



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COMBINATION OF EXCELLENT SPEAKERS AND AUDIENCE INTERACTION WILL COVER ISSUES AND UPDATES AFFECTING DAY-TO-DAY PRODUCTION FOR MEAT AND FOOD INDUSTRY BUSINESSES.

BY LACY BATES

Meat and food industry executives and managers at all levels will soon gather for one of the first industry meetings of 2025. SMA has hosted its Annual Mid-Year Conference in Arlington, Texas, each February for the past 17 years. However, this year, like the rebranding of the association SMA will now refer to the Mid-Year Conference, as the Meat, Education, Advocacy and Technology Forum or M.E.A.T Forum for short. The new name reflects the intended purpose of the meeting to provide support and educational resources for meat and poultry processors of any size and to their suppliers.

The M.E.A.T Forum will be Feb. 19-20, 2025, in Arlington, Texas. The forum welcomes anyone in the industry to attend, regardless of SMA membership. The gathering will feature two half-day general sessions on Wednesday, Feb. 19, and Thursday, Feb. 20.

SCHEDULE OF EVENTS

Wednesday, Feb. 19

- 1-5 p.m. – General Session 1
- 5-7 p.m. – Networking Reception

Thursday, Feb. 20

- 8 a.m. to noon – General Session

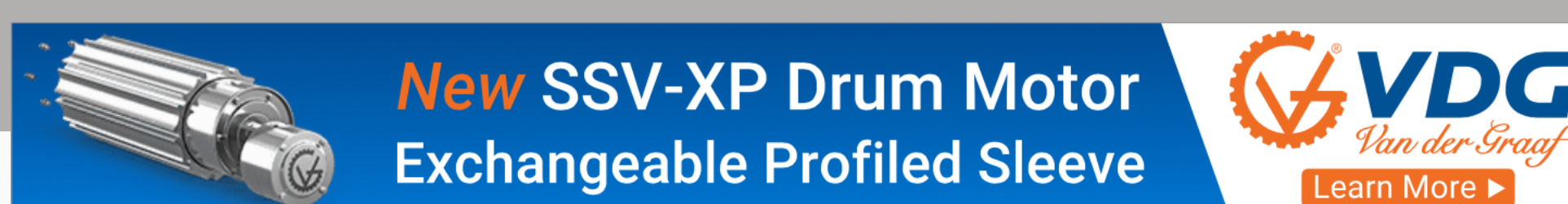
The combination of excellent speakers and audience interaction will cover issues and updates affecting day-to-day production for meat and food industry businesses. Program highlights will feature topics such as:

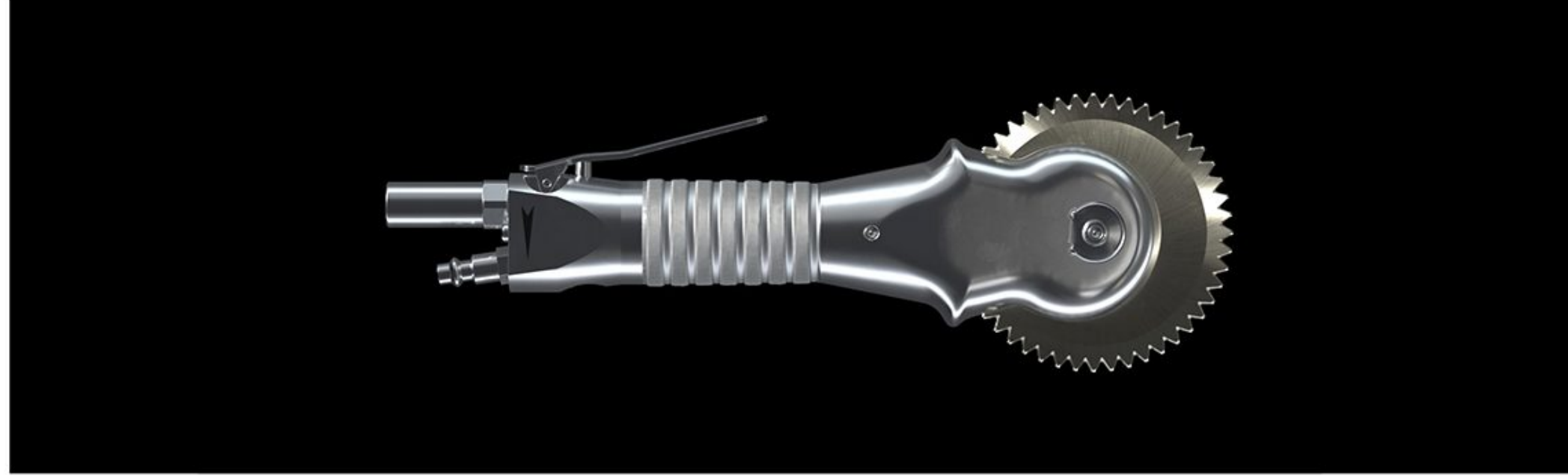
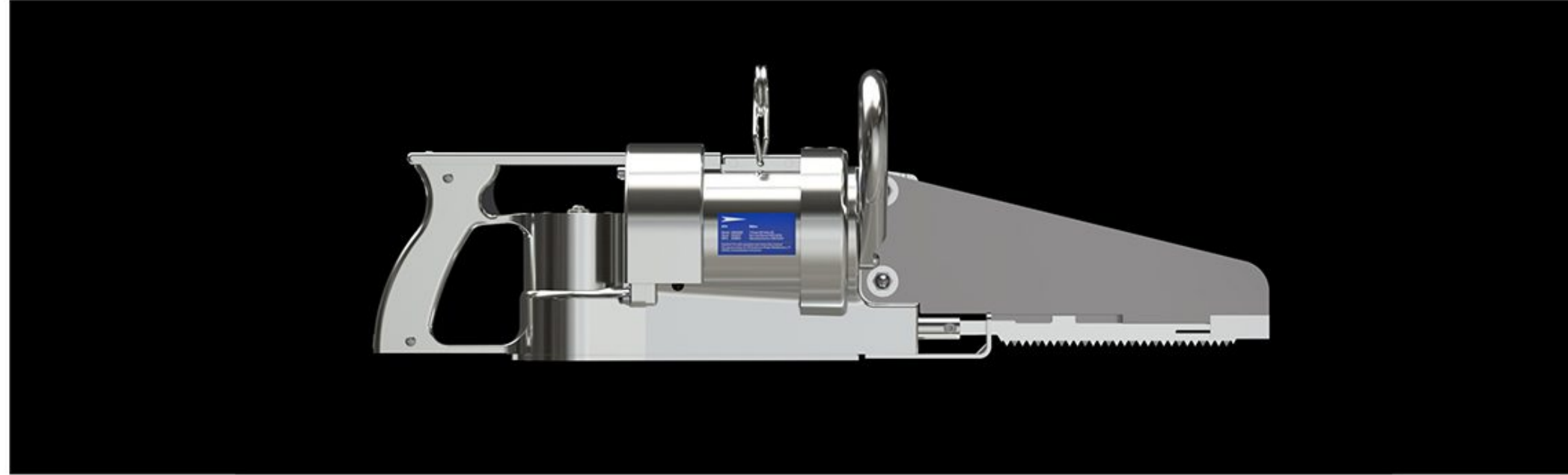
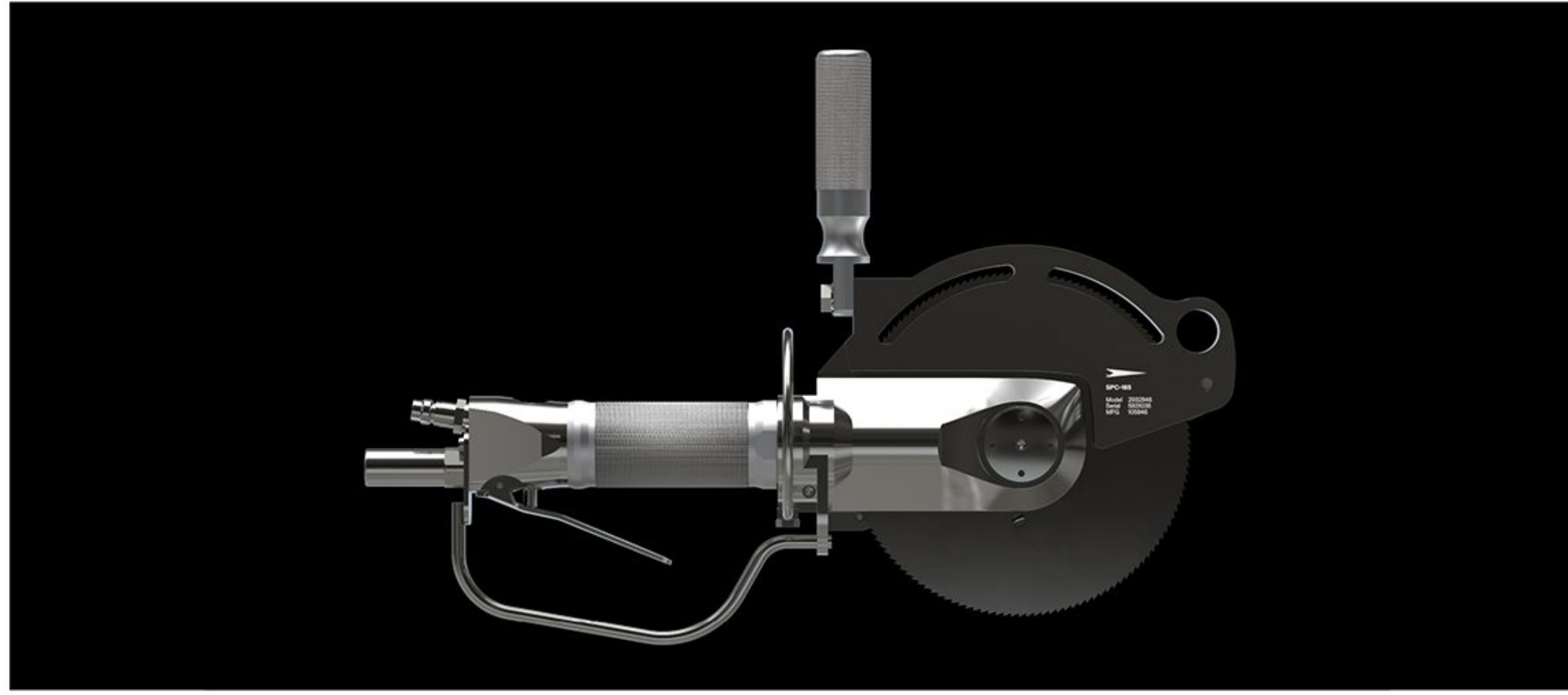
- **Listeria and Lessons Learned** – It's no secret 2024 has been a record-breaking year for Listeria recalls. During this session, prepare to understand corrective actions processors and the industry can take back to their facilities.
- **Food safety: where have we been and where are we going?** – Do consumers still have faith in the food industry to produce safe and wholesome products? Travel back in time to learn just how far our industry has come and what we can do moving forward to regain and keep the trust of American consumers.
- **Regulatory and Legal Updates** – Get the latest updates from industry stakeholders regarding Salmonella Framework for raw poultry products, Labeling Claims, EPA Meat and Poultry Products Effluent Wastewater Guidelines, Beef Modernization, and more.
- **Workplace Issues** – SMA's fan-favorite, David Barron of Cozen O'Connor will give the audience the newest updates in employment law.
- **Commodity Outlook** – Dr. David Anderson, Ag Economics Professor from Texas A&M University will entertain attendees with his ag commodity forecasting.
- **Supply Chain Sustainability** – Learn about the latest supply chain audit used to understand and improve working conditions and environmental performance within your business.
- **Co-packing** – Interested in co-packing for another processor or do you have a product co-packed at another facility? Discover the do's and don'ts of co-packing.
- **FSIS Q&A Session** – Closing out the forum, the FSIS Dallas District will be available to answer questions and update processors on the latest regulatory information.

This year's M.E.A.T Forum is sponsored by Versacor Managed Pest Solutions, Handtmann, and Amcor. Sponsorship opportunities are still available. Reach out to the SMA Office for more information.

The M.E.A.T Forum is a "must attend" conference for many industry leaders and one you don't want to miss. More information and registration can be found [here](#).

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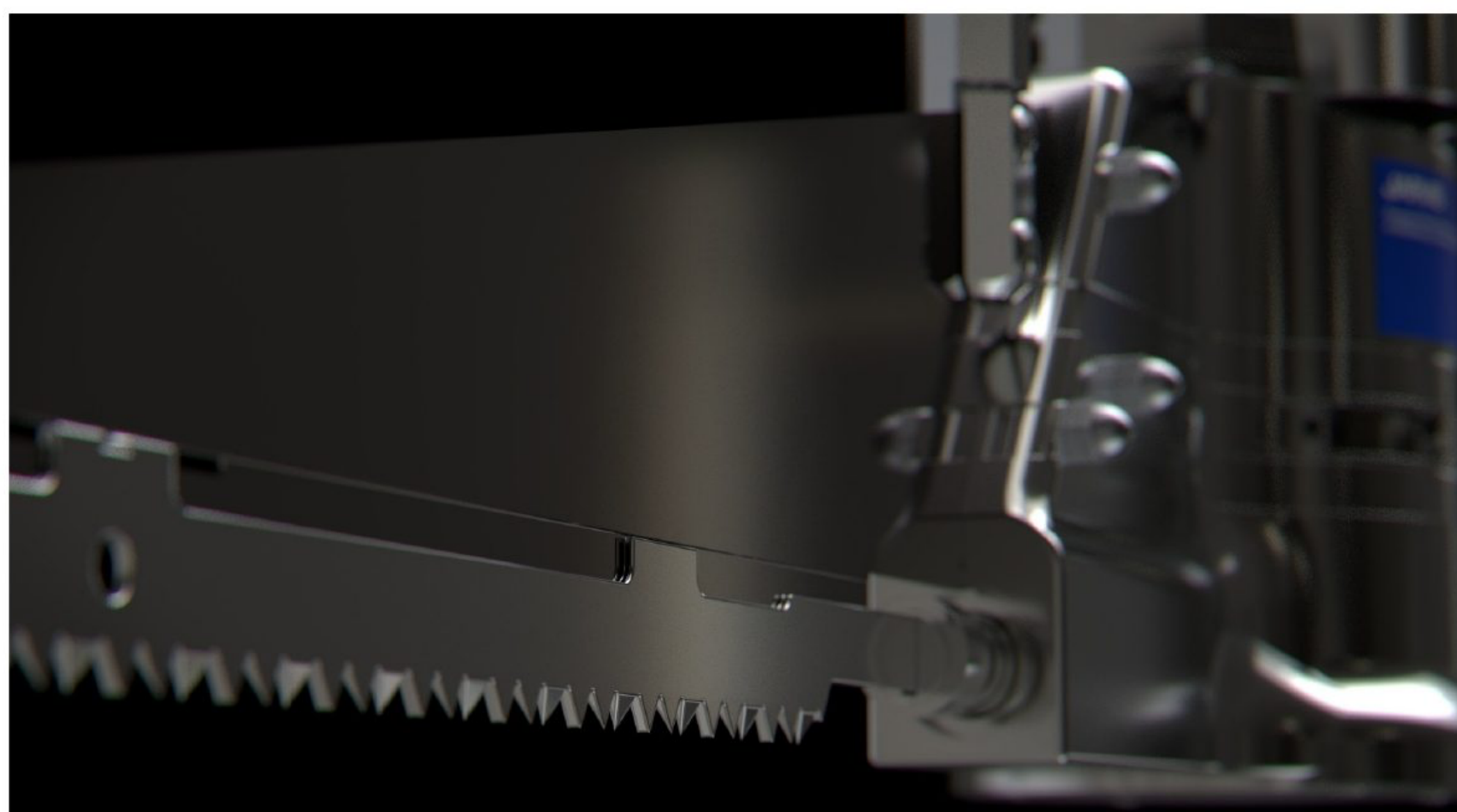
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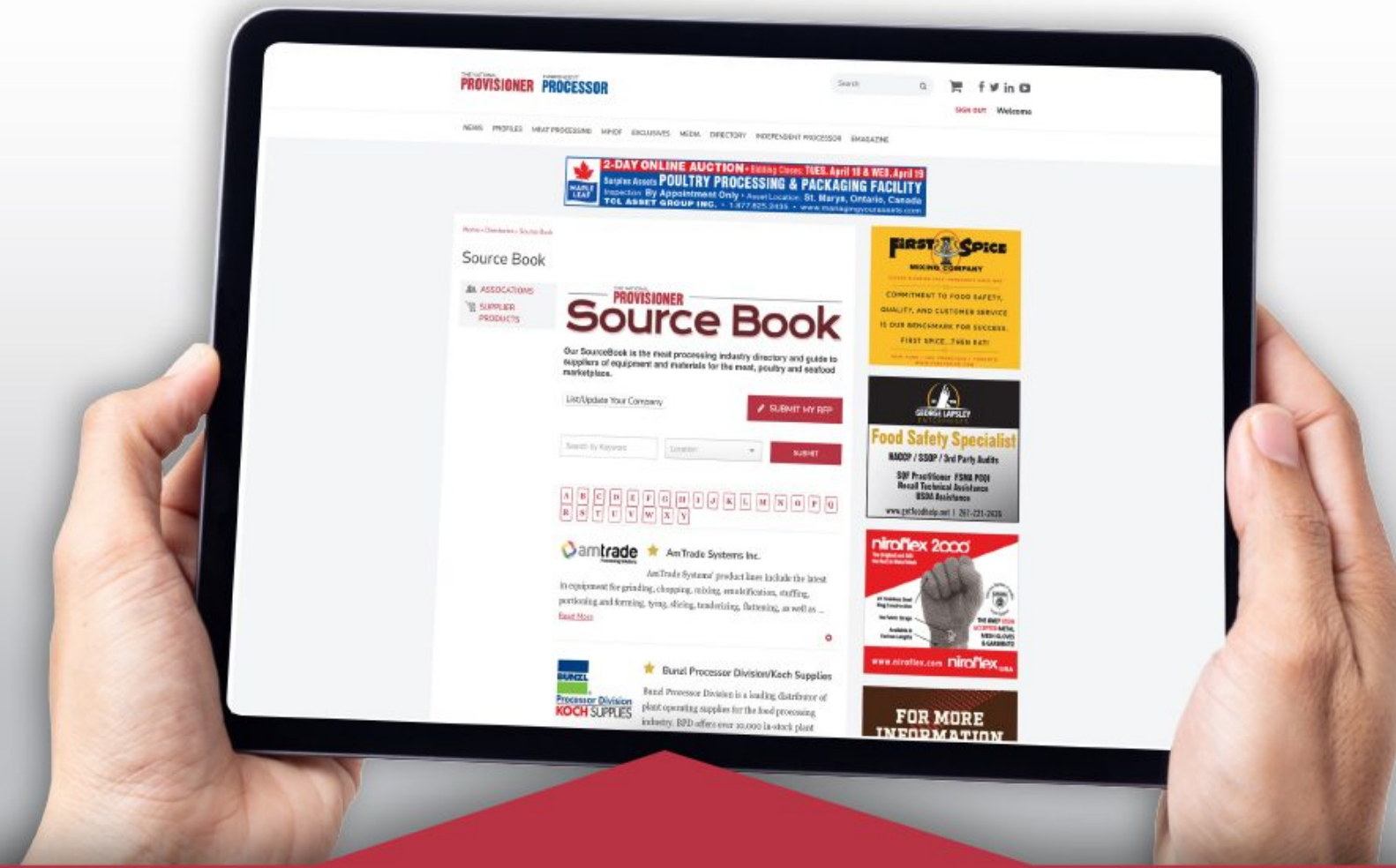
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