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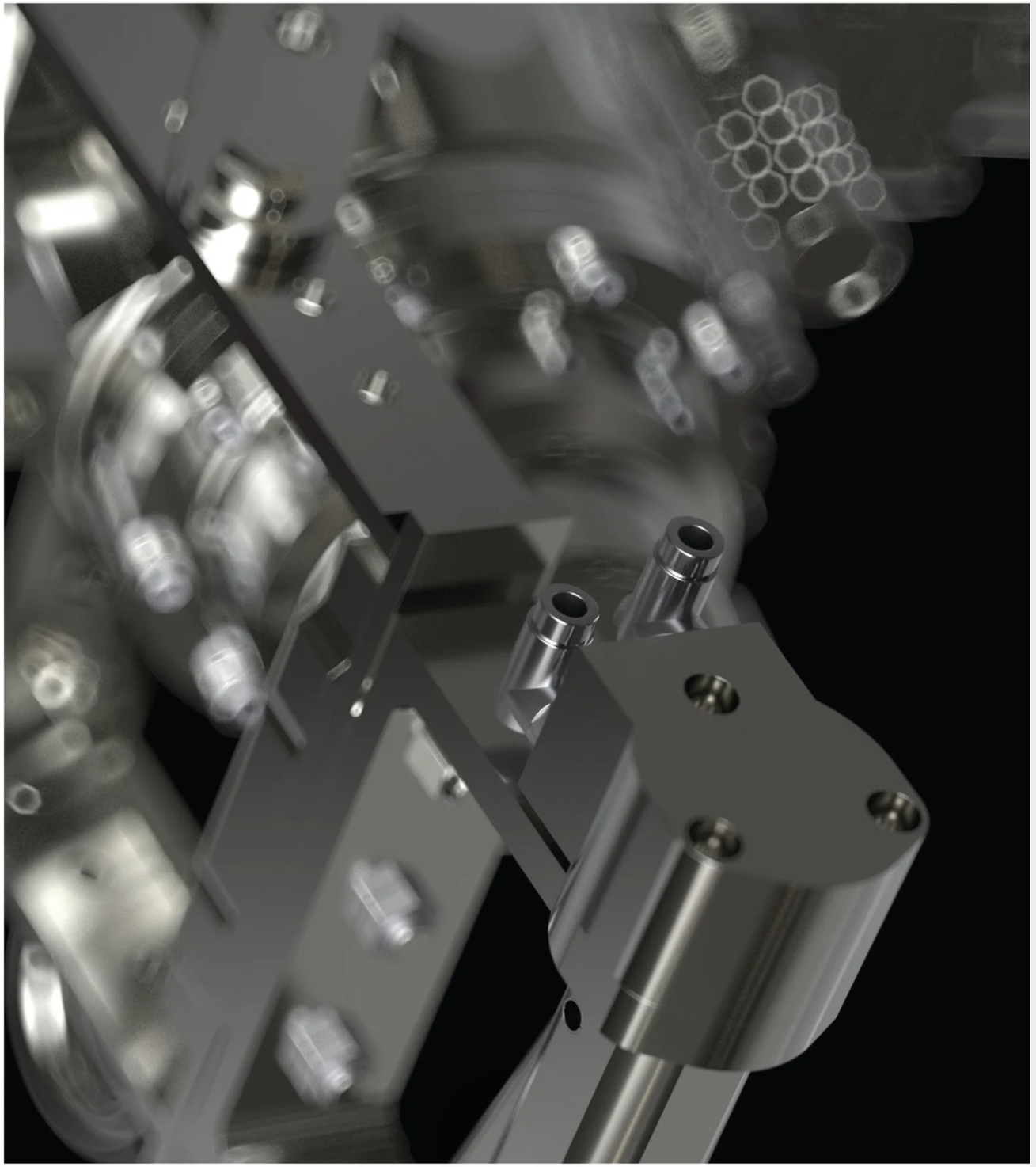
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NATIONAL PORK BOARD CAMPAIGN FOCUSES ON HISPANIC CONSUMERS

The National Pork Board's Hispanic market outreach effort -- the Explora Todo El Gusto Del Pork campaign — ties into the traditional role pork plays in Hispanic cuisine. NPB's Jose de Jesus discusses how pork products are positioned to meet the need of today's Hispanic consumers.

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BY FRED WILKINSON



SAUSAGE DELIVERS

IN A MARKETPLACE WHERE PROCESSED MEAT sales are lagging overall, sausage products are proving their appeal to consumers seeking value and versatility.

Among national marketers, Tyson Foods' Wright and Hillshire Farm brands have recently rolled out new fully cooked products in the sausage category, with Wright expanding beyond bacon with its first-ever rope sausage line and Hillshire Farm expanding its smoked sausage rope and links portfolio with new flavor-forward, fully cooked varieties. The Eckrich brand recently introduced its Andouille Smoked Sausage Link, building on its Andouille Smoked Sausage Rope line that first hit the market in 2024.

Check out our 2026 Sauage Report and learn how the value consumers are finding in the category is driving new flavor profiles and product innovation.



FRED WILKINSON



EMAIL FRED WILKINSON

Opening image credit: GettyImages / Mizina



SAUSAGE BUCKS SLUMPING SALES TRENDS IN PROCESSED MEATS CATEGORY

VARIETY AND VERSATILITY FOR ALL MEAL OCCASIONS WIN SAUSAGE BROAD CONSUMER POPULARITY.

BY FRED WILKINSON
CHIEF EDITOR

DINNER SAUSAGE IS BUCKING THE TREND of sagging processed meat sales across the category, with dinner sausage posting a 1.7% increase in pound sales in May 2026, according to Circana retail sales data analysis.

Sales of dinner sausage were $505 million in May 2026, with dollar sales up 1.8% over year-ago levels and pounds sold rising 1.7%. Circana analysis finds breakfast sausage sales of $180 million for May 2026, down -0.5% in sales and -1.7% in pounds sold vs. a year ago. The average price for dinner sausage in May 2026 was $4.43 (up 0.1% from a year prior), while Breakfast sausage prices averaged $4.92 (up 1.2%).

According to the National Hot Dog and Sausage Council, the top sausage markets in the US in 2025 were:

- New York
- Los Angeles
- Chicago
- Dallas/Fort Worth
- Houston
- Washington DC/Hagerstown, Md.
- Philadelphia
- Boston/Manchester
- Atlanta
- Phoenix/Prescott



Courtesy Rancher's Premium Smokehouse

The council finds that in 2025 dinner sausage sales totaled more than 1.2 billion pounds, with sales exceeding $5.7 billion. Breakfast sausage sales were 418 million pounds, with $2.1 billion in sales. Dinner sausage consumption is fairly uniform throughout various income levels, while lower income families consume the most breakfast sausage.

Larger families eat the most breakfast and dinner sausage, as do younger families, with sausage consumption falling for older consumers.

Grass Fed Foods CEO Kevin Pallaoro said sausage hits a sweet spot between convenience, value and flavor for a broad range of consumers.

"It's one of the few proteins that can deliver a complete eating experience right out of the package — seasoned, portioned and quick to prepare," Pallaoro said. "For today's consumer, especially younger families, all of that matters. At the same time, sausage offers culinary flexibility — it can be breakfast, lunch or dinner, and easily stretched across multiple meals."

Grass Fed Foods markets 100% grass-fed, grass-finished beef breakfast sausage links and patties.



Courtesy Rancher's Premium Smokehouse

"Patties tend to over-index in breakfast occasions because they're easy to portion and fit naturally into sandwiches," Pallaoro said. "Links, however, continue to perform well for both breakfast plates and dinner applications, where presentation and versatility matter."

For sausage packaging, he noted increasing consumer interest in formats tailored toward smaller households as well as multi-meal usage"

While price remains important, Lee Lyles, executive vice president for Rancher's Premium Smokehouse, said shoppers are increasingly paying attention to ingredient statements, protein content and the quality of meat used in products.

"Convenience is also a major driver, with consumers gravitating toward fully cooked, easy-to-prepare options that fit busy lifestyles.," Lyles said. "Consumers' dollars continue to be stretched, and at the same time, eating habits are increasingly shifting toward high-protein options. Sausage checks both of those boxes. It provides a satisfying source of protein in an affordable, convenient, and often ready-to-eat format that fits today's busy lifestyles."

Beyond nutrition and value, he noted that sausage offers a unique combination of flavor, versatility and convenience.

"It works across multiple meal occasions, from breakfast to quick weeknight dinners, and delivers the bold, craveable taste consumers are looking for without requiring extensive meal preparation," Lyles said. "In today's environment, consumers are seeking products that maximize both value and enjoyment, and sausage continues to resonate because it delivers on both."

Consumers are looking for products that deliver both value and quality, Lyles said, adding that, "We're also seeing growing interest in authenticity and heritage. Consumers want to know where their food comes from and the story behind the brands they purchase. We've been making smoked sausage in Texas since 1941, and the original smoker that started it all remains part of our process today. While we've only expanded nationally in the last two years, that commitment to traditional smoking methods and craftsmanship continues to resonate with shoppers."

Consumers continue to seek innovative new flavors for their shopping basket, he said. "Rancher's Premium Smokehouse provides bold, craveable flavors that elevate everyday meals. Traditional smokehouse-inspired flavors remain strong, but we're also seeing growing interest in regional barbecue influences, and globally inspired flavor profiles. At the same time, shoppers still value familiar, approachable flavors that can appeal to the entire family. We've seen success in balancing delivering exciting flavor experiences and maintaining the comfort and versatility consumers expect from sausage."

All photos courtesy of 4kodiak / Getty Images Plus

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CHARCUTERIE ARTISANS SCALES TO BECOME LARGEST US CHARCUTERIE MANUFACTURER

CHARCUTERIE ARTISANS DISCUSSES CAPACITY EXPANSION, FOOD SAFETY INVESTMENTS AND EXPANDED INNOVATION CAPABILITIES AS IT GROWS ITS PREMIUM CHARCUTERIE PLATFORM.

BY SAMMY BREDAR
ASSOCIATE GROUP EDITOR

CHARCUTERIE ARTISANS IS ENTERING A NEW PHASE OF GROWTH as the company expands its production platform, brand portfolio and innovation capabilities to support demand across the premium charcuterie and meat snack segments.

The company, which has a legacy spanning more than 50 years, recently went through several major changes, including its acquisition by an investment fund managed by private equity firm Industrial Opportunity Partners, as well as its own acquisition of the La Quercia brand and production capabilities and the establishment of a new Innovation Center. The transition also includes new leadership, with Jeff Tripician serving as CEO and John Brock in the role of executive vice president of sales and marketing.

Brock said the company's recent investments position it to meet long-term demand while maintaining its Rhode Island roots, Italian heritage and decades of production experience. "We are the largest charcuterie manufacturer in the US, which means we can produce at scale while insulated from import tariff fluctuations," he said.

Charcuterie Artisans operates facilities in Rhode Island, Utah and Iowa, with each location supporting different production capabilities. Brock said those operations range from handcrafted production to high-volume operations producing prosciutto, salami, whole-muscle products and cooked salumi products, including mortadella and pepperoni. The company produces products in sliced and bulk formats, along with chubs, entertaining trays and snack packs.

Brock noted that by the end of 2026, Charcuterie Artisans' more than 660,000 square feet of manufacturing space will be capable of producing 54 million pounds of product. The company serves branded and private-label customers across grocery, club, foodservice, convenience and other channels.



That production footprint is central to the company's approach to partnerships. Brock said Charcuterie Artisans' motto is "Our plant is your plant," reflecting the company's interest in working with partners that can use its innovation facilities and production efficiencies to grow their own businesses.

As Charcuterie Artisans scales, the company is looking to expand in private-label and white-label markets. Brock noted that the company sees a strong opportunity in using its expertise and increased production capacity to serve a wider range of customers beyond its own branded portfolio.

The acquisition of La Quercia expands Charcuterie Artisans' position across the premium and artisanal charcuterie market. Brock said La Quercia's appeal came from the brand's craftsmanship, responsible sourcing and leadership in American-style dry-cured whole-muscle products.



The Charcuterie Artisans Innovation Center in Mapleville, RI



The new facility will serve as a collaborative hub, bringing national, regional, and local retailers and food service operators of all sizes from across the United States to Rhode Island for product development, manufacturing innovation, and strategic partnerships.

"La Quercia has long been recognized as one of the pioneers of American artisan cured meats, and what initially drew us to the brand was the depth of its craftsmanship and commitment to responsible sourcing," Brock said. He noted that both companies share a belief that great charcuterie starts with great raw materials, respect for tradition and thoughtful use of modern tools to improve quality and consistency.

Strategically, La Quercia adds Iowa-based dry-curing and specialty production capabilities to Charcuterie Artisans' broader manufacturing platform. Brock said the acquisition gives the company more ways to serve its customers while maintaining the distinct identity of the brand.

Preserving La Quercia's craft culture is a priority as the company integrates the brand into its portfolio. Brock noted that Charcuterie Artisans is focused on preserving La Quercia's ingredient sourcing philosophy and humane animal standards, slower traditional curing processes where appropriate, relationships with chefs, farmers and specialty customers, as well as its employees.

"Our goal is to provide resources, scale, and investment while protecting the characteristics that made La Quercia successful in the first place," Brock said.



Cristiano Creminelli shows guests a map of the 561,444-square-foot production facility and campus in Mapleville



Gianni Santamaria speaks with guests about the importance of the Innovation Center

PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT AND CONSUMER DEMAND

Consumer trends are influencing the company's product development strategy. Brock said Charcuterie Artisans has consistently used clean-label ingredients and traditional processing techniques proven over time. "We prioritize innovating with high-quality protein in convenient, right-sized formats, making sure we meet the demands of consumers who need to feel confident their grocery dollars are well spent," Brock said.

Brock said the company uses flavor and format innovation to keep the category engaging for consumers, noting that limited-time flavor profiles and new formats can appeal to consumers looking for a "treasure hunt" experience. Recent examples include Creminelli's Black Truffle and Espelette flavors, as well as La Quercia prosciutto offerings in flavors including hot honey, black pepper and cherry.

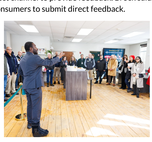
While product innovation is a top priority for Charcuterie Artisans, Brock said scaling production has also required continued investment in sanitation, food safety and quality assurance. Over the past two years, Charcuterie Artisans has increased daily swabbing and testing by 400%, conducting more than 3,000 ATP swabs per month.

Brock said the company has a less than 2% failure rate, crediting that performance to a sanitation team of 60 employees who clean and sanitize the company's facilities each night. "It truly takes a village, and that extends all the way to the customers enjoying our product," Brock said.

As part of its focus on quality assurance and customer service, Charcuterie Artisans added a customer care hotline contact directly to its packages, giving consumers a more direct channel to provide feedback. Brock said Charcuterie Artisans' complaint rate is at an all-time low, even as it is now easier for consumers to submit direct feedback.



Congressman Gabe Amo joins Gianni Santamaria and guests in celebrating the grand opening



Congressman Gabe Amo shares how important businesses, like Charcuterie Artisans, are for the local Rhode Island economy



A wall of photos highlights the 50-year history of Charcuterie Artisans in Rhode Island

INNOVATION CENTER SUPPORTING GROWTH

The Charcuterie Artisans Innovation Center, newly opened on the Rhode Island campus, is set to play a key role in the company's future product development, process improvement and commercialization. Brock said the facility brings together R&D, culinary development and commercialization teams in a purpose-built environment designed to support collaboration and speed to market.

The Innovation Center also supports cross-brand learning, as Charcuterie Artisans continues integrating its portfolio and production capabilities. Brock said the facility is designed as a place where traditional craft knowledge and modern food science can work together.

Charcuterie Artisans also recently relaunched the Daniele brand, which Brock said rounds out the branded portfolio and offers both buyers and consumers charcuterie products at a range of price points.

As Charcuterie Artisans continues expanding, the company is positioning itself around both scale and specialization. Its growth strategy combines branded charcuterie, private-label production, food safety investment and product innovation, all while maintaining a focus on traditional salumi and premium snack formats.





Mario Muza, Executive Vice President of Operations & Supply Chain for Charcuterie Artisans, shows guests a rack of cured meats hanging in the production facility. Guests at the grand opening were treated to a behind the scenes tour of the manufacturing process.

All photos: courtesy Stephanie Alvarez Evens and Charcuterie Artisans



AUTOMATION STRATEGIES

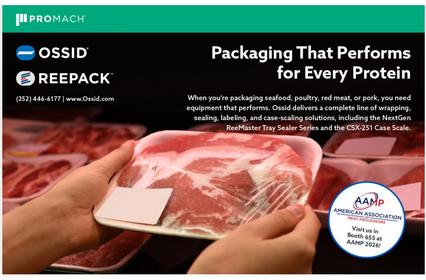
EXPAND BEYOND LABOR REPLACEMENT

FOOD SAFETY OUTCOMES RELY ON COORDINATED EFFORTS ACROSS ENVIRONMENTAL MONITORING, SANITATION, DOCUMENTATION AND EQUIPMENT DESIGN.

BY SAMMY BREDAR
ASSOCIATE GROUP EDITOR

FOOD SAFETY RISKS IN MEAT AND POULTRY PROCESSING rarely stem from a single failure. Pathogen control, sanitation execution, supplier documentation and equipment design all influence whether a processor identifies and addresses hazards before they reach finished product.

Across processing operations, food safety strategies are becoming increasingly interconnected. Rather than focusing primarily on end-product testing, processors are prioritizing environmental monitoring programs, strengthening sanitation verification, improving traceability systems and evaluating how equipment design affects cleanability and contamination risk. Together, these efforts support a more proactive approach to food safety management across the plant.



LOOKING BEYOND FINISHED-PRODUCT TESTING

Pathogen control remains a top priority for processors, particularly as facilities balance production demands with food safety requirements.

"Though meat and poultry producers face individual risks specific to their facilities, there are several themes in the industry including pathogen control, potential cross-contamination from processing steps, and foreign material contamination risks that tend to be top of mind for producers today," said Christina Barnes, senior manager, microbiology R&D, Neogen.

Barnes noted that processors must manage pathogen risks in both the production environment and finished products while maintaining throughput and meeting shelf-life requirements. Facilities also face the possibility of foreign material contamination, which can create downstream consequences for both consumers and manufacturers.

Environmental monitoring programs have become a key tool for managing those risks. According to Erin Crowley, head of global thought leadership at Neogen, microbial contamination is not distributed evenly throughout a production lot, and many food safety incidents trace back to failures in prerequisite programs rather than critical control points.

"The processing plant environment and other food associated environments are important sources of pathogen and spoilage organism contamination," Crowley said. "As a result, the attention has shifted from only testing final product to raw materials and production environment to prevent contamination of the final product."

Environmental monitoring helps processors identify potential contamination sources and evaluate environmental risks before they become broader food safety issues. Crowley said comprehensive programs help facilities focus resources on areas that pose the greatest risk while supporting both food safety and product quality objectives.

Regulatory expectations have evolved alongside environmental monitoring practices. "As a response, we are seeing regulatory frameworks updating regulations to include more specific requirements for monitoring of the process environment. In the end, the implementation of science-based measures are critical to avoid contamination from reaching the final product and ultimately, the consumer," Crowley said.

Data analysis is increasingly serving as the bridge between food safety programs. Environmental monitoring, sanitation verification and traceability systems all generate information that can help processors identify trends, investigate root causes and respond more quickly when risks emerge. Crowley said processors continue to explore ways to use data aggregation to support root-cause investigations, evaluate seasonal variation and make predictive decisions before contamination occurs.



OEM suppliers, like Provisur, develop next generation equipment with food safety as the highest priority, which means designing for cleanability, leakage reduction, effective machine guarding, and sanitation as all fundamental pillars. Courtesy of Provisur

SANITATION PROGRAMS REQUIRE MORE THAN CLEANING

While environmental monitoring helps identify risks, sanitation programs remain one of the most important defenses against contamination.

Scott King, vice president of food safety at Fortrex, said many facilities still view sanitation too narrowly. "Sanitation is often thought about in a silo," King said.

Instead, King recommends treating sanitation as part of a broader hygienic risk management strategy. That approach incorporates hygienic zoning, Good Manufacturing Practices, sanitary design, sanitation programs and food safety verification efforts into a single framework.

Labor availability presents another challenge. "There are fewer and fewer experienced sanitation professionals available in the industry," King said.

Finding, training and retaining sanitation employees remains difficult, particularly for overnight shifts and other demanding production environments. King said facilities need managers and supervisors who understand sanitation fundamentals and can effectively support and retain team members.

Processors are also placing greater emphasis on both validation and verification to confirm that sanitation programs are working as intended. King said advanced validation and verification methods are becoming faster, more cost effective and more widely available as regulatory and customer expectations continue to increase. In ready-to-eat operations, processors are placing particular emphasis on quantitative analytical methods that help verify cleaning effectiveness and support pathogen control objectives.

Looking ahead, King expects technology to continue improving sanitation programs. However, he emphasized that fundamentals remain essential. "New technologies for understanding and analyzing data are providing a more rapid generation of insights that make us more efficient in truly understanding how effective our sanitation practices are."

DOCUMENTATION AND TRACEABILITY

Food safety programs extend well beyond the production floor. For many meat and poultry processors, supplier documentation and recordkeeping create some of the most persistent compliance challenges.

Fabiola Negrón, director of food safety at Registrar Corp., said incomplete or delayed supplier documentation can create verification gaps that affect compliance decisions.

Recordkeeping practices can also create problems when records become outdated, incomplete or difficult to retrieve during inspections.

"These issues directly affect traceability, as effective traceability depends on accurate, complete, and connected records across the supply chain," Negrón said. "When information is missing or not properly linked, it becomes difficult to quickly trace products or demonstrate compliance during audits or recall situations."

Although FDA's Food Safety Modernization Act does not directly apply to meat and poultry products regulated by USDA-FSIS, Negrón said the law has influenced broader industry expectations, particularly for companies operating under both FDA and USDA oversight. As a result, many processors have adopted more preventive approaches, expanded supply-chain controls and invested in enhanced traceability and documentation systems.

Negrón said processors can improve compliance readiness by standardizing documentation, integrating systems and using digital tools to support traceability and recordkeeping.

"Digital traceability and compliance tools can automate data capture, recordkeeping, and reporting, making information more accurate and readily accessible during audits or recalls," she said.

Negrón noted that artificial intelligence can support document creation, review and risk identification when used appropriately, though human oversight is necessary.

DESIGNING FOOD SAFETY INTO EQUIPMENT

Sanitary equipment design has become increasingly important as processors seek to reduce harborage points, improve cleaning efficiency and support environmental monitoring and sanitation objectives throughout production.

Bill Dillon, product specialist at Provisur Technologies, said processors evaluating new equipment pay close attention to cleanability and sanitation features, looking to OEMs to provide options for accessibility to food-contact surfaces and clean-in-place (CIP) capabilities.

Design decisions can reduce areas where moisture, residue or product buildup may accumulate while simplifying cleaning and inspection procedures. "Minimizing mating surfaces and using solid materials, in contrast to hollow tubing, is a definite consideration for OEMs when designing new processing equipment," Dillon said.

Processors' expectations around sanitary design continue to evolve as facilities adopt more automated production systems and manufacturers update sanitary standards.

Dillon said operator training and maintenance also play a crucial role in food safety performance. "The role of operator and maintenance training is instrumental in ensuring safe and thorough machine operation, as well as effective sanitation," he said.

Equipment suppliers increasingly incorporate food safety considerations directly into product development. Cleanability, leakage reduction, machine guarding and sanitation requirements now influence design decisions from the earliest stages of development.

"For OEM suppliers developing next-generation equipment, food safety is the highest priority," Dillon said. "Designing for cleanability, leakage reduction, effective machine guarding, and sanitation are all fundamental pillars in the design of new equipment."

In the face of evolving regulatory expectations, labor challenges and operational complexity, food safety programs are becoming more integrated across operations. Together, environmental monitoring, sanitation, traceability and sanitary equipment design all form the foundation of preventive food safety strategies designed to identify risks earlier, strengthen verification efforts and support continuous improvement.

Opening photo: Poultry processors hold OEM equipment suppliers to new and updated industrial sanitation standards, especially with the increasing implementation of more automated systems as opposed to previous manual processes. Photos courtesy of rez-art / Getty Images Plus



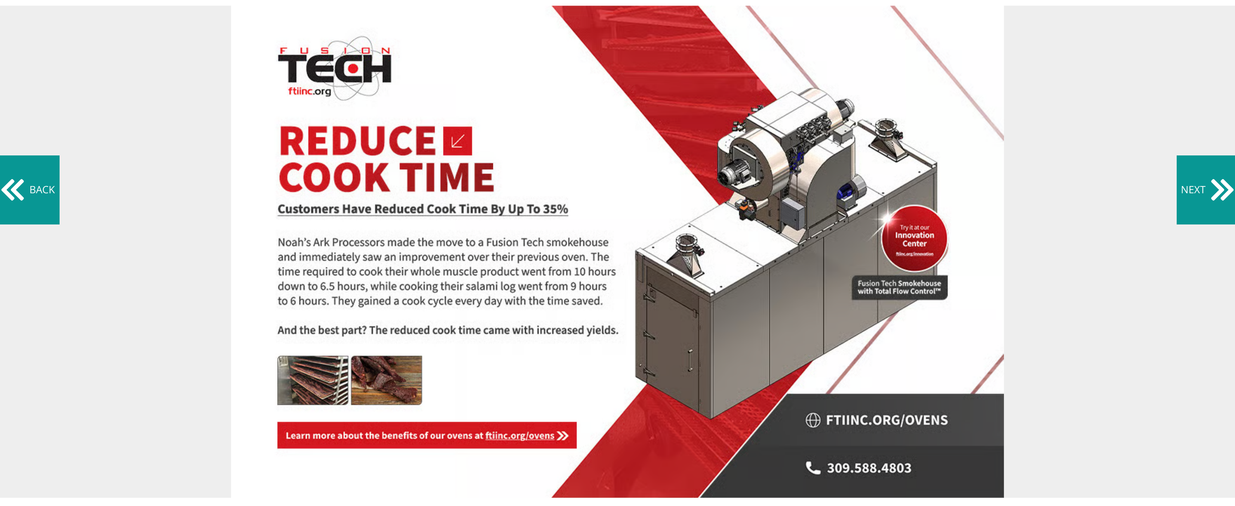
THE RISK OF COMPLACENCY

EXPERIENCED EMPLOYEES WHO HAVE PERFORMED THE SAME TASK THOUSANDS OF TIMES BEFORE FREQUENTLY POSE THE GREATER RISK FOR FOOD SAFETY INCIDENTS.

BY SHAWN K. STEVENS
FOOD INDUSTRY COUNSEL LLC

THE NEWEST EMPLOYEE IN A FOOD PROCESSING FACILITY is often assumed to be the riskiest one. After all, new employees are often unfamiliar with procedures, equipment, and food safety expectations. They require training, supervision and reinforcement. Yet in my experience, both as a food safety attorney and in reviewing the facts surrounding recalls, outbreaks, and regulatory enforcement actions, the greater risk frequently comes from a very different source: the experienced employee who has performed the same task thousands of times before.

Experience is invaluable. It creates efficiency, confidence and consistency. But experience also carries a hidden hazard. Over time, repetitive success can create a false sense of security. When a task has been completed correctly for years without incident, employees may begin to view established procedures as suggestions rather than requirements. Small shortcuts may emerge. A step may be skipped because "nothing has ever happened before." A verification procedure may be rushed because the outcome seems predictable. A sanitation concern might even be dismissed because, as we here time and time again, it "has never caused a problem in the past."



Safety experts have a term for this phenomenon: normalization of deviance. The concept was famously discussed following the Challenger space shuttle disaster, where deviations from established standards gradually became accepted because previous departures from the relevant procedures had not resulted in immediate failure. Notably, the same dynamic can occur in food manufacturing facilities. When shortcuts do not immediately produce product contamination, recalls, or illnesses, they can slowly become part of the normal routine.

The challenge is that food safety failures rarely announce themselves in advance. A process that worked perfectly yesterday may fail today because of a slight change in weather, raw materials, equipment condition, internal environmental factors or simple chance. The absence of previous problems does not prove the absence of ongoing risk.

The aviation industry has also long recognized this danger. Experienced pilots are trained to use checklists not because they lack knowledge, but because they possess it. Checklists exist to protect highly competent people from the very human tendency to rely on memory, assumptions, and routine. Food manufacturers should view their procedures the same way. The purpose of a verification, inspection, or sanitation procedure is not to confirm what everyone already believes to be true. It is to identify the rare occasion when assumptions are proven wrong.

Organizations can combat complacency by fostering a culture of professional curiosity. Employees should be encouraged to ask why procedures exist rather than simply memorizing them. Supervisors should periodically review long-established practices and challenge assumptions. Internal audits should focus not only on procedural compliance, but also on identifying areas where routine has replaced critical thinking.

Perhaps, most importantly, companies should recognize and reward employees who identify problems, even when doing so slows production or creates additional work. Catching a mistake before it becomes a recall is not evidence that the system failed. It is evidence that the system worked.

New employees deserve attention because they lack experience. Veteran employees deserve attention because experience can sometimes disguise risk. The goal is not to distrust expertise, but to recognize that food safety depends on vigilance at every level of the organization. In the end, the most dangerous employee in the plant is not necessarily the one who does not know the rules. It may be the one who has followed them for so long that they no longer remember why they matter.

Opening image credit: GettyImages / hxdbzxy / Getty Images Plus



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ACHIEVE SMARTER PROCESSING THROUGH DATA OPTIMIZATION

HIGH-QUALITY DATA COLLECTION IS ESSENTIAL TO MANUFACTURING SUCCESS, BUT TO IMPROVE LINE PERFORMANCE, SKILLED OPERATORS MUST BE TRAINED TO ACCESS AND ACT ON THAT DATA.

BY JORGE IZQUIERDO
PMMI

TODAY, MEAT AND POULTRY PROCESSORS ARE PRIORITIZING INTUITIVE CONTROLS, reduced manual intervention, and systems that require less internal engineering oversight. Due to workforce constraints and integration demands, processors need to embrace advanced technologies. But true manufacturing efficiency also depends on access to reliable and actionable plant-floor data.

However, the current shortage of skilled data technicians often leads to inaccuracies, and there are many challenges in the transition from manual to automated data capture. For some companies, there is a lack of — or a disparate — automation infrastructure, according to Data Acquisition, Sharing and Utilization, a report from PMMI, The Association for Packaging and Processing Technologies.

The collection of real-time data can inform predictive maintenance, as well as yield management and efficiency improvements. PMMI report participants said that quality data is a key aspect of overall equipment effectiveness (OEE). However, legacy equipment, cost constraints, and variable data sources often complicate scaling, making collaboration with original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) essential for seamless data capture and interoperability.

"There is a need for gradual implementation, ensuring projects have management buy-in and are based on capturing quality data that genuinely impacts performance," states Jorge Izquierdo, PMMI's vice president, market development. "Stakeholder buy-in ensures the most effective data utilization."

Study participants viewed measuring output as the most effective data-capture process, since it yields information that can be extracted from most machines, even older models. But to make the most of this information, all stakeholders must understand the significance of the data they receive and record.

Plus, operators should be able to assess data and alert managers to any issues. For instance, using statistical process control (SPC) to analyze a data set creates an opportunity for tactical leadership and for management to identify issues and enhance maintenance and efficiency.

Establishing a common protocol to enable widespread digital connectivity is just as important as training employees to record data accurately. Study participants agreed that OEE was the most accessible metric for delivering efficient tracking systems and more widespread data acquisition and utilization.

ADDRESSING QUALITY AND TRANSPARENCY WITH AI

Traceability and audit tracking remain a challenge for meat and poultry processors as they switch to digital quality management solutions. Connected packaging tools, including QR codes and digital labeling, are helping to improve traceability, compliance, and consumer engagement while supporting transparency initiatives.

In addition to plant-floor improvements, sustainability transparency remains a major focus amid increased consumer demand for recyclable, compostable, and lightweight packaging solutions. Consequently, processors are continuing to prioritize designs that support their circular economy goals while maintaining product shelf appeal and protection.

At the same time, demand for turnkey, fully integrated, and transparent solutions is rising, and companies are seeking suppliers capable of delivering coordinated, ready-for-production systems, according to a new research study, Processing State of the Industry 2026, developed through a collaboration between PMMI and the Food Production Solutions Association.

"Artificial intelligence [AI] adoption in processing remains gradual and risk weighted, with current use focused on data monitoring, inspection enhancement, and decision support rather than autonomous control," Izquierdo says.

Processing State of the Industry 2026 interviewees noted that while AI-supported quality and machine-adjustment tools are emerging, processors must ensure consistent and predictable outcomes before allowing systems to affect product quality or process parameters. In addition, successful AI deployment depends on stable, knowledgeable technical teams who can maintain, fine-tune, or retrain AI models over time.

Even though interest in AI is growing, and data-driven tools offer promise, processors remain pragmatic. High-cost tools require convincing justification before they can be adopted.

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Jorge Izquierdo is vice president of market development for PMMI.

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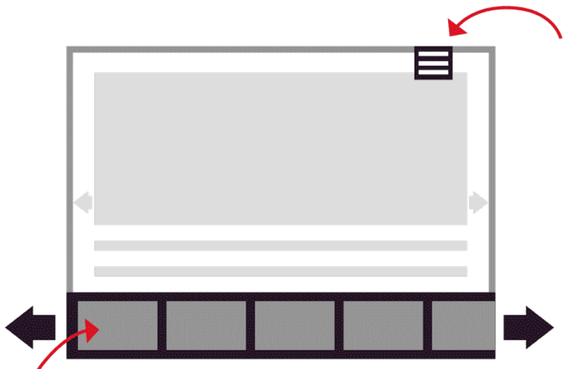
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