

Under review



Hygiene and safety in food has been brought into sharp relief recently. Ron Alalouff reports on how the Food Standards Agency is reviewing procedures to boost public confidence.

A Food Standards Agency (FSA) inspection at meat supplier Russell Hume – which counted Jamie Oliver, Hilton hotels and JD Wetherspoon as customers and also supplied schools and care homes – led in January to production being halted and recalls of product after inspectors found “serious non-compliance with food hygiene regulations”. An investigation was launched but on 18th February Russell Hume went into administration with the loss of hundreds of jobs. The investigation, which is being conducted together with Food Standards Scotland, continues.

Hygiene also came under the spotlight following the publication of undercover footage, released by ITV and the Guardian, of practices at a 2 Sisters poultry plant which purported issues with date labelling and various other non-compliances.

In response, FSA launched an investigation into 2 Sisters which identified issues around stock management and staff training but did not find all the allegations proven, nor did FSA find it necessary to take any formal enforcement action.

“The business has made a wide range of improvements across all their sites to improve processes,” said Jason Feeney, chief executive of FSA.



• Jason Feeney, chief executive of FSA.

“They are already publishing the outcomes of all their audits and are in the process of installing high quality CCTV across their estate that we will have full access to. These are measures we would like the whole industry to adopt.”

Following the findings, the House of Commons’ Environment, Foods and Rural Affairs select committee analysed the auditing and inspection processes. The main conclusions were:

- There is no systematic process for bringing together the various audits and assessments of different accreditation and regulatory bodies; as such there is no single overarching view about standards in a particular plant
- After Assured Food Standards suspended 2 Sisters’ Red Tractor accreditation, it did not “immediately and especially” inform the FSA
- Unannounced visits are not a complete surprise in that they still give producers around 30 minutes grace before the inspection begins, so people will be on their best behaviour
- The problems identified at the 2 Sisters West Bromwich plant were not a one-off.

◀ “Our inquiry should serve as a wakeup call for all accreditation firms and cause them to improve their processes and remove any loopholes that may exist, not just those discovered through our inquiry,” said committee chair, Neil Parish MP.

Public confidence

Former shadow secretary of state for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Kerry McCarthy MP, said the findings “raise serious questions as to how robust the FSA’s system for monitoring food hygiene really is. Failure on this scale can’t be attributed to just a few rogue businesses falling through the cracks. Consumers need to have confidence in the system and need to know that action is being taken against companies with incidents of major non-compliance.”

Responding to the study, an FSA spokesman said: “Only 2% of plants were found to have more than two major non-compliances. Each audit assesses almost 50 different hygiene criteria and a single issue can result in multiple major and minor non-compliances being recorded. Issues of major and minor non-compliance detected through our audits do not

necessarily mean that a food business will receive an overall negative outcome. However, it does mean the frequency of audits and unannounced inspections at sites will increase to ensure the issues raised are being addressed.”

Review of controls

On 1st March, FSA and Food Standards Scotland announced details of a comprehensive review of hygiene controls and unannounced inspections and audit regimes for meat processing and storage sites. In addition, FSA proposed working with the industry to implement the proposals for CCTV in cutting plants, increased intelligence gathering and data sharing, and improved insight into factors leading to non-compliances and the ability to anticipate them.

“Each audit assesses almost 50 different hygiene criteria and a single issue can result in multiple major and minor non-compliances being recorded.”

“We are concerned about recent instances of companies breaching hygiene rules,” said Jason Feeney and Geoff Ogle, chief executives of the Food Standards Agency and Food Standards Scotland (FSS) respectively, in a joint statement.

“People rightly expect food businesses to keep to the rules, rules designed to keep consumers safe and to sustain public trust in food – and food businesses have a duty to follow the regulations. Our review will be far-reaching and thorough, and we will announce our initial findings in June. We are pleased that the meat industry representatives who we met with have pledged their full and effective engagement with the review.”

The review aims to:

- Increase public and stakeholder confidence in the meat industry and its regulation
- Improve the ability to identify non-compliance and take prompt action to minimise the risk to public health and food safety
- Assess how the industry currently operates across the whole supply chain, and
- Increase awareness of circumstances and factors which can lead to non-compliance

The review will cover all types of cutting plants (red meat, white meat and game). It will examine how current legislation and the guidance supporting it works, how official controls (including audits, inspections, sampling and surveillance) are carried out, the roles and responsibilities of food businesses, regulators and assurance bodies, and how incidents are managed and responded to. ▶



Interfood puts safety first in bandsaw cutting

One of the most dangerous operations in the preparation of meat is cutting, with bandsaws and their moving blades particularly prone to causing injuries.

Interfood Technology, through its butchery division, is looking to assist with safety by offering the Astech SRA automatic bandsaw system. The SRA is said to cut chilled or crust-frozen product down to a temperature of minus 40°C, with a throughput of up to eight lamb loins or five lamb legs simultaneously. Safety is fundamental to the design, with the machine surrounded by a stainless steel barrier to prevent access to the interior, with a cargo area that also features a safety light curtain that stops all movement if activated. A new development is the introduction of a degree cutting function which allows the saw to be rotated and inclined to achieve specific cut thicknesses.

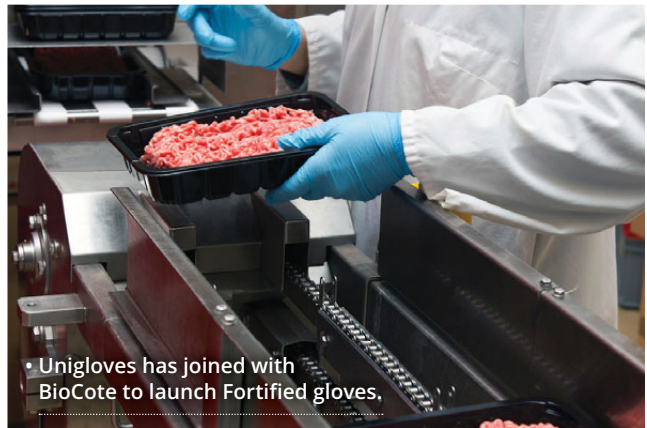
Also available is BladeStop. Designed for use in applications where sections of the moving bandsaw blade are exposed, the system was designed by Scott Automation & Robotics, working with Meat & Livestock Australia, and is available in the UK and Ireland through Interfood. When the unit senses that the operator has come into contact with the blade, or is dangerously near to it, the blade is automatically stopped in a fraction of a second.

Richard Nethercot, group divisional manager – low risk, at Interfood Technology, said: “Bandsaw safety has become a real focus and rightly so given the severity of the cuts, muscle and nerve damage and even amputations that can result in those operating them. We have therefore seen a significant increase in the number of systems purchased which can help dramatically in reducing the potential for injury.”

www.interfoodtechnology.com



• The Astech SRA Bandsaw.



• Unigloves has joined with BioCote to launch Fortified gloves.

Meat manufacturers warned of risk of vinyl gloves


Hand hygiene specialist Unigloves is raising awareness of recent research surrounding the performance of vinyl gloves in meat processing environments.

Unigloves, which has joined forces with BioCote to launch what is thought to be Europe's first food industry anti-bacterial nitrile glove – Fortified – says latest research into the performance of vinyl gloves has cast concerns over the suitability of the material.

The research reportedly highlights that, due to the microstructural organisation of vinyl disposable gloves, there are associated risks that limit their performance and affect barrier protection.

Unigloves claims plasticisers weaken the vinyl glove structure causing micro-punctures to occur and states it is estimated that 50% to 90% of punctures go unrecognised by wearers, while vinyl disposable gloves have a poor resistance to stretch and elongation and an increased permeability to bacteria and viruses, further compromising food safety.

Unigloves marketing director, Donald Gillespie, said: “The latest research casts a dark shadow over the suitability of vinyl gloves in the sector, Marks and Spencer implemented a policy back in 2015 banning the use of packaging containing a list of substances including phthalates and vinyl.”

The new Fortified single use gloves incorporate silver ion technology from BioCote said to destroy 90% of bacteria within 15 minutes and 99.5% in two hours. 

www.unigloves.co.uk