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Meat Firms Use Video to Curb Contamination

By **BILL TOMSON**

Meat companies are turning to video surveillance cameras in an effort to reduce E. coli and other contamination inside processing plants.

The new technique allows remote auditors to watch whether plant workers follow safety protocols aimed at reducing the spread of deadly bacteria.

JBS SA, the world's largest beef processor, saw a 60% drop in the level of E. coli found by company inspectors after it installed monitoring cameras, said John Ruby, head of technical services for the company's beef division. The Brazilian meat processor started with a pilot program after it recalled 380,000 pounds of beef that sickened 23 people in nine states in 2009. A trial run at its Souderton, Pa., plant showed an immediate improvement in results, so the company placed cameras in all eight of its U.S. plants.

"We are seeing increased interest among meat companies in remote video auditing as part of their food safety and animal welfare programs," said J. Patrick Boyle, president of the American Meat Institute, which represents most beef and pork packing companies. "Those who have implemented these programs have reported very good results."

Cargill Inc., another major U.S. beef producer, uses video cameras to make sure its cattle are treated humanely before they are slaughtered. The Minneapolis-based company is now considering an expansion to monitor for food safety in its pork and turkey operations, according to Mike Siemens, head of the company's animal welfare division.

Aurora, Ill.-based OSI Group LLC., a meat processor, for several years has used video cameras to monitor employees in three of its five U.S. plants for general food-safety practices. The company, which supplies McDonald's and other companies with bacon, sausage and chicken, decided in June to expand the monitoring to its other two plants.

After the JBS results, the Agriculture Department—the government agency responsible for overseeing the safety of the U.S. meat supply—in August released voluntary guidelines for video monitoring at meat companies.

"While we don't see video monitoring as a replacement for the current inspection system, we recognize the potential benefits," said Elisabeth Hagen, Agriculture undersecretary for food

safety. She said applications include "humane handling of animals, food defense from security threats, and prevention of contamination by food-borne pathogens."

E. coli-tainted beef, particularly in ground varieties, is a big threat inside the industry because it can cause acute sickness and force companies to conduct costly product recalls. E. coli poisoning can cause diarrhea and dehydration and, in severe cases, lead to kidney failure, according to the Agriculture Department.

Cattle can come into slaughterhouses with E. coli on their hides and in their guts. Producing steaks and hamburgers without contaminating the meat is a delicate process, Mr. Ruby said. An employee might work on carving up as many as 2,500 sides of beef in a shift, but just one wrong cut can allow the deadly bacteria to taint the meat.

Before the cameras were in place, supervisors at JBS would intermittently watch employees on the cutting lines. Now, remote analysts watch the video feeds and fire off reports to JBS and other clients.

Cameras that transmit video to remote analysts now monitor about half of beef produced in the U.S. at various stages of production, said Adam Aronson, chief executive of Arrowsight, Inc., which provides JBS and others with the video services. In some cases, companies are watching to see if sloppy work is allowing meat contamination. They are also using the cameras to make sure employees aren't mistakenly sending the expensive cuts into hamburger grinders.

Arrowsight has two facilities—one in Huntsville, Ala., and one in Visakhapatnam, India—employing 50 people to monitor meat-cutting operations. The company was wary about using workers in India, where parts of the country outlaw cattle slaughter, to monitor beef production. But it hasn't had problems with that, Mr. Aronson said. Arrowsight routes the most graphic slaughter video to its staff in Huntsville, he said.