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Video auditing benefits touted at animal welfare conference

(MEATPOULTRY.com, March 20, 2009)
by Joel Crews



KANSAS CITY, MO. — During presentations at this week's Animal Care & Handling Conference, there were many references to how operators of slaughtering facilities should respond to the use of undercover video footage by anti-industry interest groups whose goal it is to shed negative light on the production of protein-based food. Based on information presented at the American Meat Institute Foundation-sponsored annual event, a growing number of processors are retorting by also using video cameras trained on all aspects of their slaughtering operations.

In the course of presentations focused on management and policy issues, Adam Aronson, chief executive and founder of Arrowsight, Inc., Mt. Kisco, N.Y., told attendees how his company's Web-based system of remote auditing services and software has garnered the attention of the industry's highest profile processing companies. Interest especially piqued after the infamous Hallmark-Westland incident that led to the industry's largest beef recall and ultimate demise of the Chino, Calif.-based company. That plant reopened this past fall as American Beef Packers, Inc. under new ownership and equipped with a series of 16 video cameras and remote video auditing services provided by Aronson's firm.

Aronson said ABP is one of five slaughtering facilities his company now monitors to ensure compliance with A.M.I.'s auditing and scoring guidelines for livestock handling. Arrowsight officials are in negotiations with many other processing companies interested in implementing R.V.A. as part of their slaughtering practices and he expects to have as many as 20 more plants on board by the end of the year.

He said that most plants require five to 10, pan-tilt-zoom video cameras, which are used to conduct random audits by trained auditors controlling the cameras from offices in Huntsville, Ala.

"Typically we'll audit 500 cattle per plant, per week using the A.M.I. scoring system," Aronson said. Using the system's software, plant managers or supervisors can be electronically notified instantly if any pre-established thresholds are exceeded or if the auditors detect any problems.

In response to the Hallmark-Westland debacle, the company also audits for downer animals to ensure non-ambulatory livestock are handled correctly.

"The in-plant monitoring is an effective tool, but it didn't address a situation like the one at Hallmark," said Aronson. The company now has a system to address such issues. "Every hour, on the hour, our auditors will look at still photographs in the handling areas to see if there are any non-ambulatory animals," he said. If there are, management can be contacted or auditors can continue monitoring to ensure the animals are handled properly.

Aronson pointed out that R.V.A. is not designed to be a "gotcha" tool to catch employees doing things wrong. Likewise, the applications can extend well beyond the slaughtering areas, to improve productivity on meat cutting lines, reward compliance and enhance training efforts. Aronson showed video footage demonstrating how plant operators could, for example, zoom a camera in on the hands of a line worker to ensure they are trimming properly. "Using this kind of granular detail we can help identify over-trimming," said Aronson. "That is money."

While undercover video footage served as a wake-up call with the Hallmark-Westland incident, Aronson said video monitoring can also serve as a multi-faceted tool for processors by offering process optimization, brand protection and risk management benefits. "The technology can be much more than just one application and can easily become part of the fabric of a company's management process," he said.

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