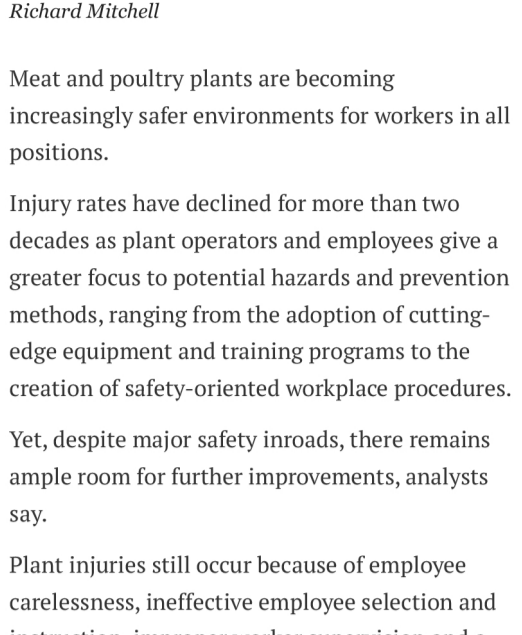


Room for improvement in meat & poultry worker safety

A greater focus on worker safety by meat and poultry processors has led to declines in injuries and accidents, but more can be done.



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Richard Mitchell

Meat and poultry plants are becoming increasingly safer environments for workers in all positions.

Injury rates have declined for more than two decades as plant operators and employees give a greater focus to potential hazards and prevention methods, ranging from the adoption of cutting-edge equipment and training programs to the creation of safety-oriented workplace procedures. Yet, despite major safety inroads, there remains ample room for further improvements, analysts say.

Plant injuries still occur because of employee carelessness, ineffective employee selection and instruction, improper worker supervision and a failure by employees to follow operational and cleaning instructions, says Norman Marriott, emeritus professor in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech) in Blacksburg.

Complacency, meanwhile, is typically the main cause of injuries for seasoned workers, says Jen Allen, vice president of operations and engineering for Allen Safety, a Merritt Island, Fla.-based global safety and process improvement company.

Such employees, she says, “become numb to their physical surroundings.” That includes not being vigilant when dealing with powered industrial truck (PTI) traffic, such as forklifts, pallet jacks and scissor lifts, as well as with thermal, mechanical and chemical hazards, Allen says.

Time constraints, meanwhile, also can affect safety. Operators, for instance, may be reluctant to pull employees off the floor for training because of the need to maintain production levels, while workers can feel pressure to sustain their output in less time, she says.

“It then can become tempting for employees to begin shaving off steps that may be vital to maintaining their safety in order to finish their jobs in the available period,” Allen says.

Because the major causes of injuries are often behavior based, “safety education and training must be a priority for staff at all levels and repeated regularly,” says Gary Malenke, senior vice president of Perdue Pork Operations, a Sioux Center, Iowa-based processor and general manager of the Sioux Preme Packing Co., a pork-processing plant in Sioux Center.

He notes that Perdue Pork Operations’ parent company, Westminster, Colo.-based Perdue Premium Meat Co., requires all staff members to undergo continual training and education, and while such measures are an “essential foundation,” developing a safety culture that goes beyond learning is vital.

“Operators need to make sure the associates put those safety practices that they learned in class into their day-to-day tasks,” Malenke notes, adding Perdue even promotes workers who daily exemplify best safety practices.

The biggest obstacles to having a safe environment, he says, includes workers who do not take personal account for their own safety or practice the protocols they have been taught, and a lack of proper engineering controls and personal protective equipment.

Yet, reducing the threat of hazards often requires behavioral changes from the entire work force, which “can sometimes be easier said than done as people get stuck in their ways,” he says. “All team members need to be truly committed to best practices and have a shared commitment to building an incident-free safety culture.”

Time is not always money

It can be difficult to persuade plant managers who prioritize productivity to adopt safety measures that may slow worker output, says Chris Fuller, owner and operator of Fuller Consulting, a San Diego-based small meat processor consulting firm.

He notes “pushing crews to work faster and harder day after day is not going to produce the numbers a company is looking for. Employees will wear out and not perform as well. Processors need to motivate employees and keeping them fresh will make workers much more efficient throughout the entire production process.”

Excessive exertion by workers also can lead to injuries, resulting in investments of additional time and money to hire and train their replacements, Fuller says.

“Investment in safety is always going to be money well spent,” he says. “Earmarking \$100 for an incentive lunch or taking workers off the production floor for five to 10 minutes each week for a quick safety training session is not a terrible expense when compared to the possible financial losses from workers’ compensation claims or legal issues because of major injuries.”

It is most effective to have a plant with a strong safety culture that all workers “keep in the forefront,” beginning with management, Fuller says, adding that “everyone in the processing facility needs to make safety a priority.”

To help create and maintain such an environment, plant operators should hold short weekly safety meetings with employees and also post signs and posters advocating safety, he says. They also should offer rewards such as lunch or ice cream to workers for accident-free periods.

“Incentives do not have to be costly and employees look forward to them” Fuller says. “Not having injuries then becomes a point of pride. It is important that safety is in everybody’s face every day.”

Because injuries often result from fatigue, he says management should ensure employees take proper breaks throughout a shift in comfortable spaces and provide them with refreshments, such as coffee, water and light snacks.

“Employees need to be able to reset their minds and come back fresh to their jobs,” Fuller says. “The margin for error is very slim when working with a band saw, chopper or cutter.”

Rotating employees among different workstations also helps reduce the wear and tear on bodies from performing repetitive tasks, he says. Examples include incessant meat cutting with knives and band saws, and lifting heavy boxes of meat and poultry.

Keep it short and simple

Recurring short training sessions, meanwhile, are typically more effective than less frequent but lengthier instructional periods, Fuller says. Multiple shorter sessions enable processors to emphasize safety more frequently while better maintaining workers’ attention, he says.

Frequent group meetings also enable veteran employees to more readily share their experiences and safety tips with younger colleagues, he notes.

Such exchanges can be particularly beneficial when there are worker shortages in meat and poultry plants and the need to quickly get new employees up to speed may leave inadequate time for proper safety instruction, Fuller says.

“Experienced workers also can preside over recent hires and make sure they are doing everything properly”, he says, adding it is vital to furnish newcomers with the proper training manuals and materials and indoctrinate them in the plant’s safety culture from the outset.

Hands-on training, Fuller says, is typically more effective than instruction from videos, online systems and other tools. Employees, for instance, who closely observe a fast-moving band saw get a better sense of its dangers and are able to receive direct guidance from the machine operator, he says.

All employees should undergo initial hands-on training at their hiring, followed by annual hands-on training on such subjects as lockout-tagout authorization, PIT driving and chemical handling, Allen says.

Powered industrial truck traffic can be particularly perilous, she says.

Despite a host of safety measures including lights and alarms, workers can still be at risk, she says. “Employees in most facilities wear hearing protection which can quiet these warnings, and it is common for more tenured employees, who are used to the flashing lights and noise around them, to tune out and become inattentive to the hazards,” Allen says.

New hires, meanwhile, often fail to properly follow proper lockout-tagout (LOTO) procedures, she says, noting such workers may not comprehend the procedures even after undergoing training.

Lockout-tagout injuries typically result from the failure of employees to render machinery inoperative before performing maintenance or servicing equipment, Allen says.

Though most workers generally follow single-source lockout-tagout procedures correctly, inadequate training can make it more difficult to perform proper lockout-tagout on equipment that uses multiple sources of energy, such as electricity and a combination of pneumatics, hydraulics and steam, she says.

“The next focus has to be on the employee’s behavior and what is driving that behavior,” Allen says, noting management can take steps to reduce accident probabilities by understanding the cause of unsafe or risky worker actions.

A failure to properly communicate

Behavior issues can result from workers having to deal with cultural and language barriers, according to the Washington, D.C.-based North American Meat Institute (NAMI).

There often is hesitancy by foreign-born workers to report discomforts or injuries to their managers because of possible ramifications, the NAMI reports, noting many employees perceive such behavior to be a weakness, or they are uncomfortable questioning authority or admitting they do not understand the given instructions.

To help ease such concerns, companies can use instructors and materials that present information in employees’ native languages and gauge their comprehension with written tests or on-floor demonstrations, a NAMI spokesperson says.

Trainers also can coach new workers at their stations and see that the employees initially perform their tasks for shorter periods “until their muscles have adjusted to the demands of the job,” the spokesperson says.

Cumulative trauma from constant gripping, twisting and reaching is a major source of worker injury, along with cuts, slips, trips and falls, the spokesperson says. Processors can help reduce such incidents by having workers incorporate stretching to loosen and strengthen muscles before and during their shifts, and by providing equipment employees can operate without intensive strain or exertion.

Also available is machinery that will automatically stop if it senses a body part is too close to a cutting blade, and heavy equipment for cutting carcasses that is counter balanced so workers do not bear most of the weight of the tools, NAMI notes.

In pursuit of safety excellence

Because contact with knife blades and other sharp objects is a frequent cause of injuries, plant operators should identify and supply the specific personal protective equipment and other safeguards optimal for each task, says Matt Spencer, director of human resources and safety programs for the Tucker, Ga.-based U.S. Poultry and Egg Association.

Spencer says it can be expensive and burdensome for some operators to leverage the most effective tools. Such elements include automation to relieve workers of the need to perform tasks that require excessive repetitive motions, providing training in a wide array of languages and dialects for better understanding by foreign-born employees and installing non-slip surfaces in plant floors while ensuring workers wear the most appropriate footwear for minimizing falls, he notes.

Nevertheless, injury rates in processing plants continue to decline as operators offer more advanced safety equipment, modify job requirements to reduce ergonomic concerns and incorporate safety guards in areas where guards are missing entirely or there are sizable gaps, Allen says.

Such gaps often are the result of U.S. processors purchasing equipment from foreign manufacturers that does not meet U.S. safety standards, she says. Domestic plants in such instances, Allen says, would need to fabricate guarding to cover moving parts and points of operation and which meet government standards.

“Industrial improvements in machinery, safety-focused behavior changes of engineers and improvements made in personal protective equipment have all helped reduce worker injuries across the sector,” Malenke says. “Further technical advancements and strong commitments by leadership will help ensure this trend continues.”

Spencer agrees, adding “an industry-wide, top-down commitment to worker safety has driven improvements,” which includes employee-driven safety committees in plants that give workers an active role in monitoring and enhancing safety.

“When we can determine what causes a worker to perform an action that could be perceived as dangerous, we can provide the opportunity to eliminate the trigger event causing the employee’s unsafe action, and thus, we’ve reduced the risk of accident,” Allen says. “Only then will we be able to reduce the remaining injuries and continue driving the trend downward to zero.”

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