



## The Million-dollar Question

The question “Just how safe is Canada’s food supply?” has been asked again in the past few months, this time more vociferously. Consumers have watched as first contaminated bagged spinach from California, then carrot juice and most recently tomatoes, were pinpointed as the cause for several hundred illnesses across North America, and in the case of spinach, three deaths. *E. coli*, botulism, and salmonella were the culprits. And just as we were going to press, two distressing stories appeared regarding food contamination – Maple Leaf Foods issued a voluntary recall of ham and pork products when syringe casings were found in processing areas of its Kitchener, Ont. plant, and Hershey Canada was in the process of voluntarily recalling several of its chocolate and candy bar brands due to the possibility of salmonella contamination at its Smith Falls, Ont. plant.

So what, then, is the answer to the question many consumers are asking? Is our food supply safe? Can we guarantee that the produce we grow, process, package, import and sell is free of foreign materials and microbial contamination? We should be able to say “yes,” but in reality the answer is more often “maybe.” That’s because although the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, as well as industry associations and the vast majority of food and beverage manufacturers, are doing their utmost to ensure the industry recognizes and has in place the best practices when it comes to food safety, follow through – from the plant floor up to the boardroom – isn’t guaranteed. In other words, you’re only as strong as your weakest link in the safety chain.

Another problem that becomes apparent only after there’s a problem, is the industry’s over-reliance on detection technology in lieu of an efficient food safety program. Last month I was lucky enough to attend the Ontario Food Protection Association’s annual meeting in Mississauga, Ont. Although the theme for the morning was foreign material exclusion, its principles could apply equally to microbial contamination. Paul Medeiros, manager of Consulting Services for the Guelph Food Technology Centre, speaking about current technologies for detecting foreign material in food products, put it aptly when he noted that “metal detectors, x-rays and optic sorters aren’t foreign material control systems,” as some manufacturers mistakenly believe. “They

simply tell you how well your food safety system is working.”

Kaz Wolkensperg, a senior auditor at Silliker Inc., who spoke about auditing food systems for foreign material risks, also drove home the point that an effective food safety system must begin long before your product reaches detectors. “If you don’t have a prerequisite program for eliminating foreign materials – for instance, having a strong general plant maintenance program, training, pest control system, cleaning program, approved supplier programs, traceability, monitoring, data analysis, self-auditing, documentation and communication – you’re overloading your detection equipment,” he said.

Wolkensperg also noted that having a plant culture focused on safety is essential to ensuring detection systems, whether for microbial or material contaminants, work the way they are supposed to. That’s because another key piece of the food safety puzzle is the human element. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, human error or indifference to proper safety or hygiene is still often the cause of product contamination. Having a plant culture that values safety, and makes the aforementioned prerequisites transparent throughout the company, can go much further toward ensuring an efficient food safety program than all the safety and hygiene manuals gathering dust in your general manager’s office.

In the end, the answer to that million-dollar question has to be that while we’d like to say our food supply is 100-per-cent safe, we’ll have to be satisfied with saying we are all doing everything we can to ensure that products containing microbial or foreign material contaminants don’t enter the Canadian food supply.

You can say that about your company can’t you?

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On a lighter note, please welcome assistant editor Natalie Locke Milne to the *Food in Canada* team. Natalie will be filling in for associate editor Deanna Rosolen, who is on maternity leave. I’m sure many of you will have the chance to meet Natalie at the numerous industry trade shows we attend, and through the many e-newsletters we produce each year.