Hartford Courant

Cameras Could Be Extra Eyes For USDA

By MARK A. SHIFFRIN and AVI SILBERSCHATZ

April 27, 2008

America's system for inspecting slaughterhouses and meatpackers is in trouble — with consumer confidence further undermined by the massive recall from a California plant found prodding sick cattle to slaughter — but the addition of computer technology to the antiquated inspection system could put sufficient transparency and scrutiny into food monitoring to maintain safety in America's meat supply.

A modern food safety regimen requires more than human observation, which can never cover every corner of a plant, and it shouldn't have to rely on whistle-blowers. It would include monitoring of streaming digital images of the processing of livestock and could assure consumers that downer cattle are not being used for food.

The location of the monitoring cameras in slaughterhouses and meatpacking plants would be determined by federal inspectors. These cameras could record any step on any assembly line to maintain virtual oversight. When a potential violation is spotted, the inspectors could have the power to stop that assembly line with the flick of a switch and look further.

It is understandable that federal inspectors can't be everywhere and that physical inspections might not see every corner of a plant at all times. Modern technology, however, allows for a virtual eye to be watching over any point in the meat processing system that feeds America, at any plant, in any country.

Video cameras used surreptitiously by activists have documented problems in slaughterhouses. They uncovered the recent abuses in California. Video monitoring has also been employed more openly as a tool for regulators looking to give extra supervision to slaughterhouses that have already gotten into trouble. It makes sense to create a system that uses webcam technology, which can readily and inexpensively put digital cameras, linked to the Internet, virtually anywhere, to scrutinize hidden corners of the food supply system.

These principles of virtual inspection could also be used to oversee fish farming in China, transmitting data on water quality of aquaculture in real time, as well as the factory operations that are modern hog and chicken farms. Through the Internet, streaming images and other data could be transmitted live and recorded at a central location to document problems at any hour.

Virtual inspection is not a replacement for physical inspection, but it means that meat processing plants would always be watched by a technological eye that never blinks. The system would not rely on the caprice of someone smuggling in a camera to document a violation, or assembly line workers blowing whistles that are too rarely heard. The virtual inspectors would never sleep and the processing plant management would have no idea when these images would be used to protect consumers from illegal practices.

Such continuous monitoring would increase consumer confidence that food inspectors are always on duty and effectively watching every licensed facility, even when not physically present.

As technology has changed hog and chicken farms into factories and allows the processing of meat through massive slaughterhouses and meatpackers, there is no reason that food inspectors should be using the same methods they used a century ago. Routine use of the tools with which we improve the efficiency and quality of other areas of our lives would bring inspection of the meat processing industry up to modern standards.

When we think nothing of having video cameras monitoring streets or nannycams watching our children, why should we have less vigilance over the factory farms, slaughterhouses and meatpackers processing our food?

Mark A. Shiffrin, a lawyer in New Haven, is a former Connecticut state consumer protection commissioner.

Avi Silberschatz is Sidney J. Weinberg Professor and chairman of computer science at Yale University.