The danger of dairy contamination

A dairy expert describes how the economic crisis has created the conditions for deadly food contamination.

In July, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration announced a national program to randomly test retail samples of soft cheese for possible contamination by disease-causing bacteria. This move was taken after dozens of deaths this year from tainted dairy foods, including a salmonella outbreak in Chicago and listeriosis transmitted by dairy products from California.

What is causing this widespread contamination of dairy products? I interviewed my brother, Richard W. Merry, a 23-year dairy production engineer based in Pittsburgh.

EIR: There have been disease outbreaks and deaths in recent years from tainted dairy products. How do you describe the situation?

Merry: Proper processing and pasteurization kills all the harmful bacteria normally present. The economic problems in the dairy industry today—from the farms through to the processors—are probably the cause of the recent problems, the large salmonella outbreak, and the listeria bacteria in cheese. Unless the economic situation improves, we're liable to see much more of this problem in the near future.

EIR: What is the real story behind the "killer cheese"?

Merry: Let's take it from the cow to the store. The listeria bacteria live in the intestines of the cow, and can be carried in the cow's white blood cells.

Contamination on the farm can be found during milking. At that time there is always the possibility of outside matter coming in contact with raw milk—hairs, straw, cell debris from the udder, and so forth. Also airborne contaminants.

If the cow has mastitis or some form of infection which has not been diagnosed by the farmer or milkhand, it is very easy for contaminants—including white blood cells that can carry listeria bacteria—to get into the raw product and be shipped on to the processor.

On arrival at the processor, if improper clarification of the milk is done, or no clarification takes place—meaning the process of separating a high percentage of foreign matter from the milk itself (by using the centrifuge principle) then listeria bacteria can be carried along with the milk. If the listeria bacteria are carried along in large, dense concentrations, they may not be killed by normal pasteurization. Clarification can eliminate many of these concentrations, and break down the others into small amounts, which will be killed in proper pasteurization, just as salmonella bacteria will be killed by proper pasteurization.

The problem is that cheese plants are not using clarification. In the past, clarification has always been the standard of good dairy practices. And the quality of raw milk supply has vastly improved through the years. But due to the economic burdens on the farmers and processers in recent years, quality can deteriorate at times.

For example, a farmer, who depends for income on the monthly milk check, may be hesitant to remove a cow from the herd due to possible sickness, and the farmer may put a cow back into the milking herd too rapidly after medication has been used.

In dairy processing, a manufacturer may be more willing, because of economic pressure, to bypass a broken piece of equipment until it is repaired, instead of being able to afford a spare piece, to be kept on hand.

The average people involved in the dairy industry, from farms to processing plants, are not bacteriologists and sanitarians. They do not realize the consequences of every step of handling the milk and dairy product throughout the whole process.

For example, salmonella is commonly found in the environment, and in dairy products, and other foods, and is normally dealt with without anyone realizing it is there. There has to be a breakdown in standard dairy practices for there to be an outbreak at epidemic levels. Unfortunately, this will happen if the economic decline continues.

EIR: What about special national health measures?

Merry: Each state has its own health regulations, but they are not bound by U.S. public health regulations unless the dairy products are shipped interstate. For example, at the present time, the clarification process is not commonly required. It should be, especially under the current conditions of economic decline for the farmer and the industry.

EIR: What about the government giving tax or other advantages for the installation of equipment necessary for public health?

Merry: Look at the clarifier. It can cost $10-100,000 depending on the capacity needed for the operations. Proper tax breaks would be an incentive for this and other equipment to be installed and used.