



CLEANING AND THE CORONAVIRUS

With the virus crisis, sanitation is needed for the safety of workers as well as product.

By Pan Demetrakakes, Senior Editor

Sanitation in food processing has mostly been a matter of food safety. The coronavirus situation has raised the stakes: Now sanitation is also a matter of *worker* safety.

As the coronavirus crisis has profoundly altered life around the world, food processing plants are among the vital enterprises that have to keep running. Unlike most microorganisms that threaten food facilities, the novel coronavirus that causes COVID-19 doesn't pose a direct danger to consumers; the consensus is that it cannot be transmitted through food or packaging. The biggest danger is to workers, who often have to work in close proximity on the plant floor.

The most common mode of transmission is directly through the air, but indirect transmission is a problem too. The virus can live up to three days on stainless steel, the most common working surface material in food plants. Cleaning

and sanitation procedures, chemicals and equipment therefore have to be able to eliminate coronavirus contamination before it can pass among personnel.

Suppliers of cleaning chemicals and equipment report that sales of, or at least interest in, their products have noticeably increased since the coronavirus pandemic broke.

"Demand for our products has increased," says Bob Forner, marketing director for Sterilex (www.sterilex.com). "March revenue is tracking over 20% higher than March 2019. We have increased production to meet demand, and April revenue is on track to more than double April 2019 revenue."

The good news, such as it is, about coronavirus is that it appears to be as susceptible to common cleaning chemicals as most microorganisms are. Users who want to be assured they're using the right chemicals can check, although

the situation is somewhat complicated by the fact that FDA regulations forbid cleaning chemicals to claim, on their labeling or elsewhere, effectiveness against specific microorganisms.

On the other hand, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has a list of disinfectants that meet its criteria for use against SARS-CoV-2, the coronavirus that causes COVID-19. The list, accessible at www.epa.gov/pesticide-registration/list-n-disinfectants-use-against-sars-cov-2, is searchable by EPA registration number.

Joel Cook, senior technical manager at Hydrite Chemical, recommends that customers consult this EPA list, while noting that, because it's a new virus, few tests on cleaner efficacy have been done.

Gloves get fingered

However, while the chemicals may not change, some standard sanitation procedures and equipment are

getting at least a second look – even something as seemingly simple as disposable gloves.

Overall demand is increasing for the disposable gloves supplied by Eagle

Protect (www.eagleprotect.com), says CEO Steve Ardagh. Perhaps just as importantly, customers are paying more attention to the quality of the gloves they furnish their staff.

“People think a glove is a glove,” Ardagh says. “Not so.” Gloves must be FDA-compliant, but all that means, he says, is that they don’t contain certain harmful chemical or leach any chemicals onto food. It doesn’t say anything about durability, for instance. Many of the disposable gloves used in food processing and similar industries are made of vinyl, which often tears; Eagle’s gloves are made of nitrile (artificial latex), which is more expensive but more durable.

Ardagh notes that gloves must be as durable as an application requires: handling frozen steaks, for instance, requires stronger gloves than handling freshly cooked pancakes. But he said durability does not necessarily correlate to thickness. “On numerous occasions we’ve given people gloves half the thickness and it’s been better than the one they’ve been using.” For instance, using chalk in the material formulation, which is often done to save money, makes the glove weaker.

“One of the positive things to my mind from this outbreak is, there’s going to be a huge focus on hand and glove hygiene,” Ardagh says.

Washed up

That focus extends to what’s probably the simplest and most pervasive all-purpose piece of advice for dealing with coronavirus: Wash your hands, thoroughly and often.

Hand washing has always been an integral part of food plant hygiene. Now the coronavirus has made this imperative for the safety of fellow workers, as well as the food they handle. For decades, automatic systems have reduced the human variability factor in hand washing, by both systematizing the process and allowing it to be tracked. Makers of such systems say they’re now getting more interest than ever.

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“We have been working closely with our customers and food processing leaders to empower them with the tools they need to ensure



effective hygiene and maintain operations during the COVID-19 pandemic.”

Some automated hand-washing systems incorporate features like making employees punch in a code or swipe or tap an ID card to activate, allowing the system to track use. Some companies are carrying the concept a step further, by establishing “hygienic locks”: barriers that isolate employees and don’t allow them to proceed until they wash their hands or perform some other hygiene-related task.

“Now many companies have adopted a mandatory mini-break where each worker is given a new facemask and must pass through a hygienic lock,” says Marco Bruno, export and key account manager for Elpress BV (www.elpress.com).

Some companies have lists, sometimes administered by a manager, who checks

off employees’ names as they wash up. But this is inefficient and labor-intensive.

“With modern hygienic locks this problem is surpassed with a pass/no pass system where if the employee washes their hands then they can pass to the next step in the process; and if they don’t, they are blocked behind a turnstile,” Bruno says.

“As a second layer of control we can also integrate the hand-washing and disinfecting with a company’s QA system via badge or biometric readers. This system then guarantees that a certain hygienic protocol has been respected to the level of



Sanitation stations can use turnstiles to ensure hand-washing and other procedures. Photo: Elpress BV

every single employee. This information can then be shared with external auditors or customers.”

