
In October over 1,200 people converged on New Orleans to attend the American Meat Institute's 96th annual convention and "Innovation Showcase".

By Graeme Goodsir

AMI Convention pledges maximum food safety

The AMI Convention –held in an alternating off-year, away from Chicago – also included a modest-scale Innovation Showcase of industry equipment, products & services, plus workshops incorporating the annual Meat Industry Research Conference (MIRC) hosted jointly by AMI and American Meat Science Association (AMSA). Patrick Boyle was re-elected by AMI's board for a 14th year as President and remains the chief of staff.

A further 350 people, including many international visitors, were at the 41st annual meeting of MICA (Meat Importers Council of America) which was held concurrently in heart of the city's French quarter, which was aglow with a festive spirit of jazz music & other noises.

Government regulations were predominant themes at both meetings. Despite many serious challenges facing the US livestock and meat industries –

and the security worries of the entire US nation and world at-large – the mood was quite upbeat at both of these annual meetings, and especially so at group dinners and other social events.

Two dominant issues were discussed at both the AMI and MICA meetings:

- **Food safety reform** – focusing on a recently-imposed government (USDA) crackdown to broaden and intensify control measures for preventing any presence of E.coli 0157 H7 or Listeria or other pathogens in red meats.
- **Irradiation of ground beef** was a workshop topic, but not high on agenda.
- **"Recently-outlined"** (but not yet final) rules concerning **Country-of-Origin Labelling (COOL)**, with which USDA has been wrestling since 1996, when Congress acted at the instigation of certain US livestock lobbyists (linked mainly to regional groups of cattle producers near the Canadian border) who want to restrain cross-border trade in live animals – as well as to impede imports of meat and meat products into the US.

Food safety top of the agenda

Better management of pathogen control was a top priority at both the AMI and MICA meetings. Recent background to food safety issues included two major product recalls which aroused widespread national publicity.

The first recall was in July by ConAgra Inc. of 19 million pounds weight (8,621 metric tons) of fresh ground beef, after a number of consumers in Colorado state suffered food-borne illness from E.coli 0157 traced to some of this product. The USDA came under some criticism for their delayed reaction in handling this recall. Later, its image was further tarnished by the release of a US government audit report (in a sep-



The six officers who will lead the AMI through 2003: Front row, left to right are: Immediate Past Chairman Phil Clemens, Hatfield Quality Meats chairman and CEO; Chairman Richard G. Searer, Oscar Mayer Foods president and group vice president, Kraft Foods North America; and AMI President and CEO J. Patrick Boyle. Back row, left to right are: Treasurer William A. Buckner, Cargill, Inc., corporate vice president and Excel Corporation president; Secretary Robert "Bo" Manly, president and COO, Premium Standard Farms and Vice Chairman Stewart K. Owens, chairman, president and CEO of Bob Evans Farms, Inc.

arate context) exposing/criticising shortcomings in the USDA's meat inspection system, related to HACCP plans in meat plants.

The second recall was in early October by Wampler Foods Inc. after consumers in north-eastern US states were afflicted by a mystery listeria infection - which aroused wide publicity and caused 7 deaths, 3 miscarriages and 46 serious illnesses.

No evidence of listeria contamination had been found in any Wampler products in the marketplace, but broad investigation of numerous meat and poultry plants had revealed the presence of this pathogen in the Wampler plant near Philadelphia - and Wampler accepted responsibility to take full precautions and recall all production from prior months. In the face of national elections looming on November 5, the USDA appeared to be under strong pressure to display high-profile political crisis-management - and to maximise the recall for the protection of consumers.

Products recalled by Wampler Foods totalled a record 27.4 million pounds weight (12,432 metric tons) of pre-

cooked turkey and chicken meats, often used for making sandwiches in deli-stores, and for home meals. It is noteworthy that - up to end of October -

causal evidence about illnesses was only circumstantial - not factual.

Wampler's voluntary decision, made in concert with USDA rec-



Newly elected AMI 2003 Chairman Rick Searer (right) accepts the chairman's gavel from former AMI Chairman Phil Clemens. Clemens was elected immediate past chairman.

MICA 41st Annual Meeting

Attendees at the Meat Importers Council of America sessions heard a detailed presentation by Barry Carpenter (Deputy Administrator of USDA Agricultural Marketing Service) about Country-of-Origin Labelling – for which broad guidelines had recently been issued on business areas that will or won't be affected (foodservice industry is excluded).

The proposed system is opposed by the AMI, FMI supermarket association and some US livestock groups - it looks like a bureaucratic nightmare, requiring all livestock in US/Canada to have and retain birth certificates, and estimated to cost \$1.4 billion yearly. Compliance is voluntary until 2004 – which may be enough time to prove the concept unworkable.

The MICA meeting was attended by sizable delegations from Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Brazil (which made a forceful presentation, with positive hopes of re-entering the US market at a future time with fresh-frozen beef free of FMD) and Uruguay (whose fresh-frozen processing beef gained FMD re-entry status on 24th October for Canadian import market

– but remains pending for import to US).

There were large numbers of US importers, processors and transport-warehouse operators. Shipping Lines conferred with MICA about west coast port problems

Considerable time was devoted to new USDA rules requiring vendors of beef at all stages of the pipeline (including exporting countries) to ensure that HACCP plans are effective for eliminating or minimising risks of contamination by pathogens, including E.coli 0157 and Listeria. USDA import inspectors will be checking in future for evidence of compliance. Workshop sessions were also held on anti-terrorist strategies (with Customs co-ordination) & beef checkoff programs.

Outlook papers were presented by delegates from Australia (Dr. Peter Barnard from MLA said bad drought was increasing livestock slaughter, while many export markets were slack) and New Zealand (Andrew Burt of MNZ saw steadier export trends ahead for both dairy beef and sheepmeat).

MICA Economist Len Steiner presented an analysis which emphasised the prospect of record-large disappearance of meat and poultry in US for year 2002 of near 78.637 billion pounds – up 3.1% from 2001. He expects a decline of 1.4% in 2003, with some upward tilt in prices of most meat products. He also expects US beef imports to grow in 2003 by Uruguay being re-admitted for its 20,000 m/t quota; Australia and New Zealand will remain stable by once again filling their respective import quotas.

Jeff Isenmann from Swift/AMH in Greeley, Colorado, was elected the new Chairman.

Retiring MICA Chairman Peter Maloney was honored for many years of service, as was processor Donald Blackburn for 20 years of service as a MICA director. A large banquet honored former Executive Director William Morrison (1979-2001) whose successor is Laurie Bryant, a former representative of New Zealand Meat Board who served in both North America and in Europe.

ommendations, had major commercial repercussions. Unlike the ConAgra recall (which was said not to have incurred large costs, because not much product was actually returned), Wampler's recall led to widespread public reaction, with ongoing media reports that sales of these branded pre-cooked products have dropped sharply in the aftermath.

More dissension at AMI

On the Friday morning before the AMI General Session a convention workshop session heard various federal government regulators – including Administrators of four divisions within USDA (FSIS, AMS,

FAS and GIPSA) - explained their various views. Dr Garry McKee, the newly-appointed head of FSIS (Food Safety & Inspection Service, whose meat inspection competence had been questioned in the government audit report) made what observers called “a surprisingly harsh speech” – stating that “HACCP systems in some plants are broken and need to be repaired.” He said the USDA will step up enforcement of food safety regulations by more vigorously training its Consumer Safety Officers, and by instituting tougher tests for Listeria. He added that if his inspector officers find that plants don't have ade-

quate safeguards, inspectors will be withdrawn and the plant products would then be un-saleable. This statement was taken to be a serious threat, and evoked some memories of USDA official Mike Taylor coming to AMI's convention in 1994 (also an election year) and declaring E.coli 0157:H7 to be an adulterant if found in ground beef offered for sale to consumers.

Some meat executives in the audience felt all four government speeches collectively implied that “everything is industry's fault, concerning both food safety and any related shortcomings in HACCP systems”. Many industry people quietly bristled about hav-



AMI President and CEO J. Patrick Boyle (left) and Assistant Secretary of Labour John L. Henshaw (right) sign a cooperative alliance dedicated to worker safety enhancements throughout the meat industry.

ing to be accountable for all known shortcomings at various stages of the market chain from farm-to-table, including the USDA's meat inspection system – but AMI nonetheless is pledging to take initiatives and find solutions in years ahead.

Rallying cry by new AMI leader

At the packed General Session following the Friday morning workshops, newly-elected AMI Chairman Rick Searer – who is also President of Oscar Mayer Foods and group vice president Kraft Foods North America – pledged to “leave the trenches” and lead a new attack on all food safety challenges that now threaten the progress and survival of meat and poultry industry operators.

In his acceptance speech, Mr Searer urged AMI members and industry participants to rise to this challenge. He made strong declarations that “We are doomed to be living in interesting times.....

but we are **not** doomed to inaction...and we will **not** be doomed by failure!”

He impressed the large audience, including some sceptical listeners, with the power of his conviction and his commitment to re-take a leadership role in pursuing food safety reforms with regulators and consumer groups. He pledged to maintain food safety's status as a top priority and non-competitive issue in the year ahead, and to “go beyond managing issues and fighting regulators” by doubling the efforts of AMI Foundation to solve food safety problems with genuine science. He ended his brief speech with a rallying catch-cry of “Let's get back to work!” - amid loud applause.

New initiatives by AMI

Significant leads were taken during the convention, including:

- An appeal to the USDA to permit the use of irradiated beef in a pilot test for school lunch programs.

Award ceremonies

Three traditional AMI awards were bestowed at AMI 2002.

Industry Advancement - awarded to Mick Colvin for development of the Certified Angus Beef brand marketing program;

Community Service - awarded to Mrs Launa Stayer of Maloney & Johnsonville Sausage for raising \$2.7 million since 1993 to support a range of charities, plus a \$2.5 million college gift & constant food donations to help needy people);

Supplier of the Year - awarded to Edward Gustafson of Viskase Corporation).

In addition, a new industry award was created by the AMI Foundation for **Scientific Advancement**. The inaugural winner was microbiologist William Sperber Ph.D.,

from Cargill group, for a distinguished career that included worldwide food safety initiatives. He was (among many other feats) a co-developer of the Fraser broth for rapid screening of *Listeria monocytogenes*. In his acceptance remarks, Dr. Sperber said recent chaos in government regulation of the US meat and poultry industry was unequalled in his experience since the year 1973.

An award was also made to the AMI by an outside group. **America's Second Harvest** – the nation's largest domestic hunger relief organization, serving over 23 million needy people – honored AMI with its “Association of the Year Award”. Since 1989, AMI members have donated over 40 million pounds weight (18,150 m/tons) of surplus meat and poultry products to nationwide food banks affiliated with Second Harvest; they pledged a 10% increase in donations by year 2004.

- Formal agreement to establish a working alliance between AMI and the US Dept. of Labour's Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) to improve workplace safety.
- A vote to declare animal welfare a “non-competitive” issue among AMI members, in order to foster co-operation for optimal standards in all plants. **MI**