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The Making of a Food Safety Culture

At any supermarket, one of the high-traffic areas is the in-store bakery. Popular with shoppers and profitable for grocers, it's the place to pick up fresh-baked bread, muffins, cakes and other items.

To deliver baked goods hot from the oven and continuously throughout the day, stores often depend on pre-made baking mixes. That's where mix-maker SR Packaging Inc. of Calgary comes in.

Capital improvements and staff training are allowing this baking mix company to improve traceability and sanitation efficiency. The company, which supplies both in-store and retail baking operations, recently completed a major project to enhance its food safety capabilities. As co-owner and regulatory compliance director Julie Vanden Heuvel explains, this three-part initiative will allow the company to maintain its strong commitment to food safety.

"When products arrive at our receiving area, the information is entered into a handheld receiving unit," says Vanden Heuvel. "This device prints a pallet sticker on the spot to identify the inventory and this identification carries all the way through the production process. This allows us to have full electronic traceability on everything that goes into the final product."

This innovative technology helps safeguard food safety on a number of levels. First, the system improves the precision of stock rotation, such that longer-held inventory is used first. Second, in the unlikely event of a food safety concern at the customer level, SR Packaging can quickly trace, identify and if necessary recall the relevant product.

"If an issue ever occurred, we now have at our fingertips all the information we need to act in a timely manner," says Vanden Heuvel.

At SR Packaging, the mixing of baking ingredients is the heart of the production process. As part of its 2010 capital investments, the company purchased a mixer with clean-in place technology, a system that reduces employee handling, thereby improving the effectiveness of sanitation activities.

The greatest assurance of food safety isn't a software program or a whiz-bang handheld device. It's the experience and judgment of well-trained people. The third element of SR Packaging's 2010 upgrade was the training of two staff members in the HACCP (Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points) system, through a program offered by the Alberta Food Processors Association.

For a company like SR Packaging, new software, equipment and training are big-ticket items. That's why Growing Forward, a federal-provincial-territorial initiative, stepped up to the plate. The Growing Forward Food Safety Processor Program helps processors improve their food safety practices in several possible ways: through adoption of food safety systems, undergoing food safety audits, participating in food safety training or through capital equipment purchases that directly impact food safety.

SR Packaging's capital purchases were eligible for a 50-50 cost share, subject to a \$50,000 maximum. The Growing Forward Food Safety Processor Program kicked in 70 per cent of the company's HACCP training costs, up to a \$25,000 ceiling. Janice Futz, Safe Food Systems Specialist with Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development, applauds the dedication to food safety shown by SR Packaging. When the right philosophy meets the right equipment and training, she notes, food safety becomes part of the corporate culture.

"This is a company that understands what it means to have a food safety culture," says Futz. "For them it is about optimizing the opportunity to do the right thing. They truly live and breathe food safety."

Processors looking for more information can contact the Ag-Info Centre at 310-FARM (3276) or visit the Growing Forward website at www.GrowingForward.alberta.ca

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