

# Less control and more management

by Sam Osili, Pestfree Environmental Services Ltd, North Cottage, 55 North Street, Rushden, Northants NN10 6BU, UK.

As anyone in the food industry will tell you, pests are an environmental headache that can cause thousands of pounds worth of damage.

In order for pest management to be managed properly, it needs to be seen as part of the overall food hygiene policy of a company and taking a long term view will ultimately save money and management time in effecting good manufacturing practices.

Pests, sadly nowadays, feature in everyday life, whether in private households such as rats under the garden decking or mice in the loft space.

In the commercial food operational environment whether in the facilities, in products or in the processing areas, pests of all kinds are a fact of life that has to be dealt with by the hygiene/QA/technical function.

Indeed pest management is an integral part of the management of food safety and section 3.10 of the BRC Global Standards specifies a specific requirement for a pest control service in a food environment.

However, there are a wide range of views and expectations about pest control among users.



While the UK food industry has some of the best food safety management systems and facilities in the world, part of this is that, most establishments have some form of pest control system on site, either operated by a third party or in house.

The question I always ask is whether the pest management systems in place are really a formality for compliance to food safety requirements or whether it is intended to

ensure a long term pest free environment?

In many cases I know that companies take a short term view of pest management by operating only the control function rather than view it as part of the overall food hygiene function.

Table 1 demonstrates there is a whole range of 'nasties' to be dealt with across the food chain and the pest controller is responsible for the control/eradication of these.

Equally there are a number of challenges – technical, and commercial regarding compliance – that the pest control industry has to overcome to achieve its objectives.

## The technical challenge

All types of business are concerned about the environment and this has had a knock on effect on the pest control industry. Just recently a survey by WRAP, the government's waste body, revealed that UK households throw away a total of 3.3m tonnes of food per year with the figure for the food service industry many more tonnes per year.

This increase in waste of course means higher levels of pests, but sadly less resources to deal with them especially as pests are increasingly resistant to pesticides.

Pesticide free pest control and products combined with low rates of research and development, high cost of new products registration, tighter control on pest control waste means less 'tools for the job'.

## The commercial challenge

In food manufacturing, pest problems can result in damages not just to products, but to the fabric of the building and process equipment, all with consequential financial loss. And of course, loss of production time as well as the public relations issues of pests being found by the consumer in the finished food products can all have a major negative impact on the company's brand name.

Indeed, there have been several recently

reported product recall incidents by major food manufacturers due to pest problems. Also, each year, a handful of food establishments are prosecuted for pest related problems at their facilities by the Environmental Health Agencies.

The seriousness of some of these potential problems is not always reflected in the response from some users of pest management services. They focus solely on price of service without an understanding of what is being offered. Some users abdicate responsibility for decisions while others feel that the amount of money involved is below their 'noise level' and, therefore, leave decisions to junior staff that may not be fully conversant with the issues.

Of more concern is the fact that users of pest management are under pressure commercially with their margins being squeezed by their own customers. That inevitably means budget cuts, just as things are becoming difficult for the pest control industry.

Finally, the costs of all the inputs into pest control service are rising, materials, fuel, insurance, labour etc, and there are no practical avenues for improvements in efficiencies.

This is even more so as the population of pests is rising due to life style and environmental changes. In other words, it is a 'double whammy' to the industry.

## The compliance challenge

As suppliers seek inputs from the far reaches of the world in order to be competitive, pest control risks are rarely at the top of their requirements. The result is the distribution centres that handle these supplies are also victim to pests.

Pest management service specifications are sometimes inadequately designed particularly where a user is trying to save money.

This inevitably results in problems further down the line. Add to this, poorly trained pest control personnel and zero tolerance from the enforcement agencies and you have a potentially business damaging scenario.

Distribution centres can and sometimes

*Continued on page 7*

Continued from page 5  
do suffer massive infestation problems which can ultimately affect otherwise pest free environments.

Unfortunately, these lean and automated operations with minimum manpower mostly focusing on getting product out and in to the stores as quickly as possible are ideal conditions for pests.

Spillages and breakages, frequently open doors, stacks of pallets and re-usable trays all provide ideal conditions for infestation, as operators focus on turning around the goods quickly from the warehouses.

With more automation, the situation is deteriorating because fewer operatives are available to notice potential problems until it is too late. Mice can chew through electrical cables and computer hardware, causing expensive damage, resulting in lost time and poor availability at the supermarket, not to mention the cost of repairs and replacement of the damaged equipment.

It is ironic that in today's world of high tech production and lean, fast automated distribution that the food industry is still at the mercy of mice, flies and other pests.

The problem is that a significant number of food establishments still operate under the pest control protocol, which is now dated, is reactive and very ineffectual. This is rather



like 'shutting the gate after the horse has bolted'. Controlling pests is not the answer, but managing them and in many instances, stopping them at the gate, before they can even get into the food production environment.

There are several commercial reasons why food processors adopt the pest control systems and not the more effective pest management system. These include:

1 Pressure to reduce costs due to squeezed margins resulting in seeking cheaper but ineffectual pest control systems. In many cases customers want more but are paying less for the service and the supplier can do so much.

1 Down time for cleaning and hygiene can be expensive in this competitive climate and pressure is always on, to minimise and sometimes avoid down times. Therefore, plants are not cleaned as often as is required.

1 Relegation of responsibilities for pest con-

## Food Sector

Warehouses and distribution centres  
Cereal and baking  
Food service and hospitality  
Retail  
Beverages

## Typically associated pests

Rodents, fruit flies, SPI  
Rodents, stored products insects (SPI)  
Rodents, fruit flies, ladder beetles  
Rodents, fruit flies, SPI  
Cockroaches, mice, fruit flies

**Table 1. Pests that occur across the food chain.**

trol and hygiene to junior management, many of whom are either unable to appreciate the benefits of a proactive service or too busy with more pressing duties to manage. 1 Poor communication between departments, and staff, ignorance and fear of decision making.

## So what is the solution?

Pest control suppliers are responding to the demands of the market with several new strategies including:

1 New technology such as:

- Bar code data capture systems – where barcodes located at monitoring points are scanned electronically during inspections.
- Online reporting – where pest control information is placed online with controlled access to the contents.
- Electronic rodent monitors and traps – where the monitor sends electronic messages to notify someone that it has been activated.
- Acoustic stored products insects detectors – these measure the noise emitted by SPI during SPI activities.

1 New pesticides/materials. These include organic oils, diatomaceous earth, soluble sachets of pesticides and phosphine generators.

1 New service management systems.

Biologist only service; external pest control auditors – all of whom rely on the use of high quality personnel for managing pest problems.

The problem is that most of the current new technology methods are not proven especially as rodent behaviour for instance is so unpredictable. The new monitors are not operational for most periods either due to lack of GPS signals especially in basements or in factories, or simple failure from harsh environmental conditions.

Online reporting has been described by an ex-user as of as much use to him as a 'bicycle to a fish' because it removes him from his factory floor where the problems are. He has to look at his computer to find out what is happening at his site because the pest control technician is gone before he gets to see him.

My view is that the starting point is for the food industry to use 'joined up thinking' in the management of pest eradication. The solution and key to a pest free food operational environment is to implement an integrated pest management (IPM) system. This should have a comprehensive mix of methods and techniques to ensure consistent and high level performance at all times.

Food processors should ensure that their pest management service provider is competent (BPCA or equivalent registration) and adequately resourced to prevent problems and to look after them in their hour of need.

Clients should critically examine what is on offer and how it fits in with their operations. The proposed solution should be innovative, proactive and avoids 'hidden costs' such as the demand on the client's management's time.

There are now several new generation pest management systems that deliver convergence or joined up systems such as HAPPs and PPMS supplied by Pestfree Environmental Services Ltd. HAPPs is the first complete hygiene management system designed to reduce the workload of site technical/QA/hygiene management by combining internal hygiene auditing with pest management inspections in one simplified audit.

The programmes deliver synergies within the food safety management system that result in improvements in site hygiene and GMP systems at little or no extra costs. It reduces the client's audit management workload, while releasing management time.

This also means cost savings as the in-house audit resource can be deployed elsewhere. Pestfree's clients who use these innovative services come up 'smelling of roses' at food safety/hygiene audits.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, the food industry needs to improve its appreciation of the new generation of innovative and cost effective pest management systems on offer. There are significant benefits to be achieved, which ultimately filter into their bottom line while comfortably meeting food safety requirements. Surely, a win-win for all!

Pestfree Environmental Services Ltd is one of the UK's leading supplier of pest, food safety and environmental management services to the food manufacturing and food service industries. Its clients include some of the biggest names in food retail, food manufacturing and hospitality establishments in the UK.

Pestfree offers services in pest management, hygiene services, food safety management, environmental services and undertakes training in these areas from bespoke pest management/food safety/hygiene/HACCP training to health and safety awareness courses. n

FaxNOW +44 1933 317789

✉ office@pest-free.co.uk