

masters

Having been instrumental in the development of HACCP plans and SSOPs, FSIS Administrator Barbara Masters now finds herself at the forefront of educating small and very small processors on how to better implement them.

DEGREE

As a 17-year veteran of USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service, department Administrator Barbara Masters was there, sleeves rolled up, for the dawn of HACCP and SSOPs, EIAOs and consumer safety officers.

So it is only fitting that Masters once again finds herself leading, this time in the area of outreach to small and very small processors. It's an initiative that extends all the way back to the 1990s, when she found herself manning phones at a 24/7 hotline service that FSIS established to help both inspectors and processors deal with the realities of implementing SSOPs. "It really helped us realize the importance of establishing one-stop shopping for our employees — actually anyone with questions relating to HACCP, SSOPs and what have you," she recalls.

That thinking led to the establishment of a permanent Technical Service Center in Omaha, where "we rolled all of our regional staff together, moved them to Nebraska and provided them with the tools to become HACCP experts. Our concern was that because those employees were divided into processing staffs, slaughter staffs and so forth, they didn't necessarily have the complete skill set to evaluate a HACCP program."

They do now, and Masters is looking to

build on that expertise to reach those small and very small processors, companies that FSIS Under Secretary Richard Raymond acknowledges may have been left behind in USDA's efforts to propel food safety into the 21st century. "Last fall, we set up listening programs in Montana, California, Pennsylvania and Massachusetts, and what small and very small plants told us was that we needed to dust off and update our outreach strategy. We had provided them with the tools to develop HACCP plans, but not the guidance they needed to actually implement a well-designed HACCP program."

The agency has since begun leveraging resources to help processors fill in the blanks. Based on the phone calls and field data it receives, the Technical Service Center has begun forming *ad hoc* committees charged with bundling together information on common problems relating to pathogen control. The aim is to provide processors with more clarification and direction, but not in ways that are prescriptive; ultimately, it remains up to the processor to decide which plan of action best suits its plant. "We're looking for middle ground," Masters says. "We'll say, look, here are 10 or 15 articles to make you aware of how to plan an intervention, but it's the processor's choice whether to proceed with an



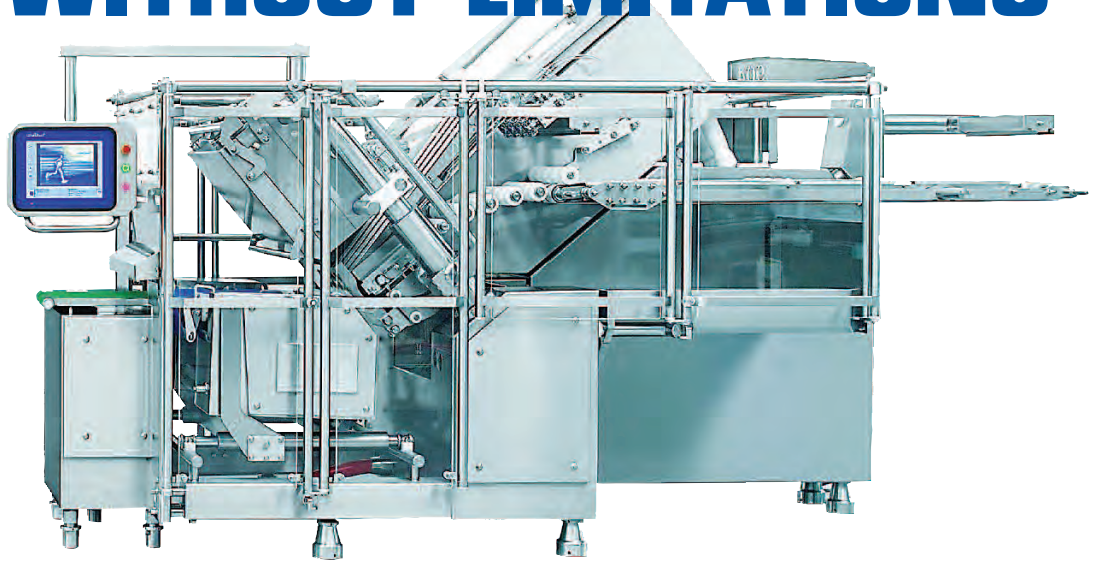
FSIS Administrator
Barbara Masters

intervention or not.

As it turns out, the Technical Service Center merely forms the bedrock of a much larger effort that, while still in its infancy, also involves joint training of plant workers and inspectors.

The training typically occurs on week-ends and evenings, with regional trainers hosting sessions on very basic regulations. "We wanted to start with regulations 4.16 and 4.17 to ensure that both plant operators and inspectors had a common understanding of what's expected," Masters says. "Assuming the training sessions are effective, the next time around we'll take it to another level, and then another. We want this to be a win-win."

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