

When things go wrong, the finger pointing starts

by

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Finger pointing is rife in the cold chain, with the pointing becoming more aggressive if a truck or trailer load of valuable produce suffers temperature abuse on its journey from farm to plate, and is deemed unfit for human consumption.

All too often, when a temperature rule is broken during a journey, or on arrival at the destination, the common practice in a non-compliant cold chain is to finger point to someone else to take responsibility, or try to hide the fact that the rule has been broken.

It seems that any activity with shared responsibility between stakeholders, by nature attracts the typical 'it's not me' attitude.

We are entering an era of change in Australia, with compliance to world's best practice now on the agenda because of recent revelations of the cost to society of food loss and wastage, which has reached crisis levels.

Commercial, consumer, logistics and contractual arrangements can no longer ignore food safety and the opportunity for waste reduction.

It's not that Australia doesn't possess the latest technologies and reporting systems for the cold chain, but compliance and optimised cold chains will never be reached until everyone in the chain properly implements the existing first level technologies.

To begin the process of change, those who are involved in the movement of food – making the transport sector a significant stakeholder – need to understand what a cold chain is.

The cold chain is a temperature-controlled supply chain of separate refrigerated events sufficient to achieve continuous temperature control of perishable goods. An unbroken, or compliant cold chain is an uninterrupted series of these events used to store and transport perishable products.

The modern cold chain is based on the principles of HACCP, the global food safety certification system which identifies food processing and delivery procedures at their individual steps to ensure food quality and integrity, including temperature, is maintained from the beginning to the end.

The steps in a HACCP process are separated into control points and critical control points

A control point (CP) is where the food temperature and the environment is controlled, such as inside a warehouse or in a monitored refrigerated transport. A critical control point (CCP) is where there is no temperature control, which typically are those areas of the chain where the goods are handled from one control point to the next or transported in an asset with inadequate controls.

A HACCP process is also a quality management system which specifies that temperature verification must occur at all control points and critical control steps during the cold chain process.

Temperature monitoring is one of the key processes of a compliant cold chain. Monitoring the temperature of foods in any inter-modal container (IMC), truck or trailer must be continuous – just taking the temperature at the end point is not enough. For transport, automatic systems are the best.

Journey temperature mapping has reached an advanced stage with smart probe technology that can measure the actual core temperature of the food product without the need to insert temperature sensors or probes into the chilled or frozen goods.

Ambient and refrigerated space air temperatures cannot be relied on to reflect accurate food product temperatures, and it is only by knowing the actual core temperature of the food product, that a safe quality decision is possible for its delivery.

When finger pointing starts after a failure in the cold chain, those involved in the transport phase need to understand that they are a primary responsible party if they can't prove product temperature from the loading dock to the IMC, if pallets are stacked so high that they block airflow to the rear of the IMC, if there is no thermal certification of equipment, or there were insufficient load restraints installed prior to the journey.

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