

Worker Safety in the Meat and Poultry Industry

The meat and poultry industry's commitment to improving workplace safety is reflected in the significant and consistent decline in illness and injury rates among its nearly 500,000 workers for more than a decade. While the meat and poultry industry is still labor intensive, promoting safe workplaces has rewards for both workers and businesses, including increased productivity, improved employee morale, reduced absenteeism and reduced expenses associated with injury and illness.

Some specific changes the meat industry has seen since instituting Voluntary Ergonomic Guidelines in 1990 include:

- Significantly reduced levels of injuries and illnesses;
- Continuing efforts to eliminate ergonomic risks and hazards in the workplace;
- Programs and process improvements tailored to individual plant situations;
- Development of an array of new tools, equipment, methods and production processes.

Results during this time period have been quite positive as is illustrated in graphs on the following pages.

Background

The Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970 was the first safety and health law covering more than 90 million employees throughout the U.S. It was developed to ensure safe working conditions for all employees. The Act sets standards that must be followed by all employers to minimize workplace hazards. Employers are held responsible for training, implementing effective safety programs, maintaining equipment and continually assessing the workplace to remove any hazards present, such as damaged and defective equipment.

Because the meat and poultry industry is labor intensive and because meat processing requires sharp tools and repetitive motion, selecting proper equipment for the job is critical and required by OSHA standards. Protective equipment for the eyes, face and head, protective clothing, respiratory devices and protective shields and barriers guard employees against hazards, including chemical or mechanical irritants. Employers are not only responsible for providing equipment, but

maintaining that equipment in a sanitary and reliable condition.

The industry has developed a variety of safety devices, guards and procedures to protect workers. One challenge employers face is ensuring that employees use the equipment provided to them and use it correctly. According to Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) data, in most head, eye, foot and leg injuries employees were not wearing protective equipment.

Employees also need to wear earplugs to protect against loud noise. Boots are worn to prevent slipping on floors and all employees wear plastic hard hats to protect against head injury. Employees are encouraged to dress warmly in areas that are kept at cold temperatures because warm muscles are less susceptible to injury.

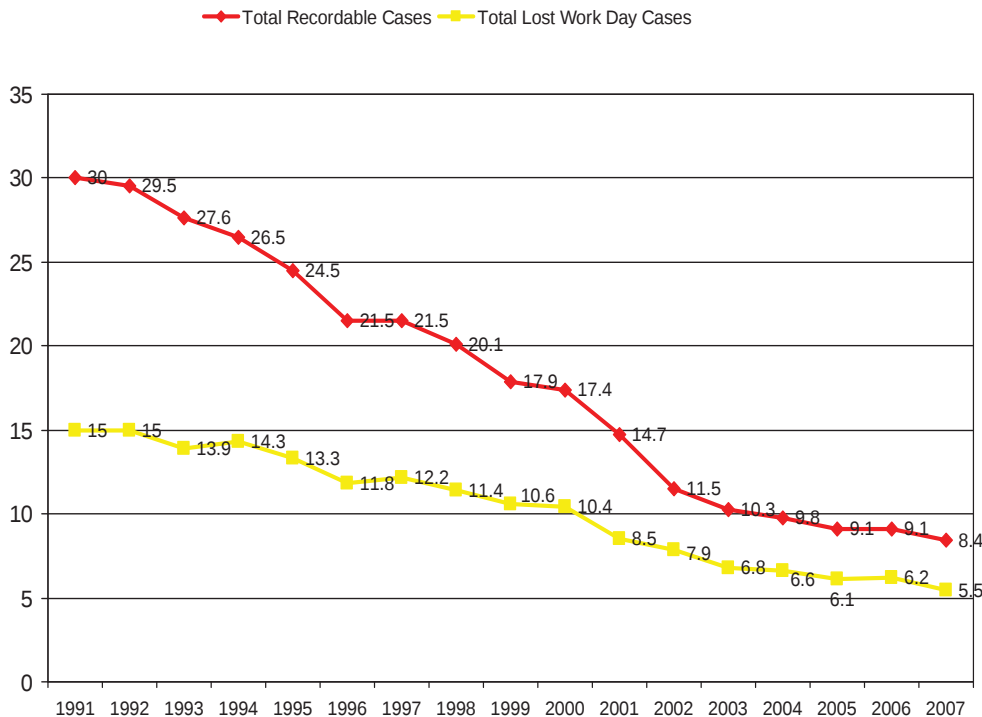
Injury & Illness Rates

Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) data indicate that the actual incidence of injuries and illnesses reported in the Meat Industry for 2007 (the most recent year for which data is available) are the lowest since BLS began recording this data in the early 1970s. Over the last 17 years, injury/illness rates in Meat Processing operations have improved by more than 70 percent.

Not all injuries and illnesses are alike. BLS provides separate data to categorize the seriousness of injuries and illnesses it records. These are the Total Incidents (Recordable) rate, and the Lost Workday Case rate. Recordables are all incidents "recorded" on the OSHA log; those requiring medical attention beyond normal first aid. Lost Workdays are a subset of Recordables, and occur under two circumstances – an injury serious enough to require at least one day away from work, or an injury requiring restricted job activity. Restricted activity can include shortened hours, a temporary job change, restriction from certain job duties or a combination of all three.

In the meat products industry – which encompasses the meat packing, meat processing and poultry processing sectors – BLS' 2007 data reports 8.4 injuries per 100 full-time workers per year. This is a reduction of nearly 8% from 2006 results. The more serious injuries, those requiring lost work days (as defined above) exhibited a significant decrease from the 2006

Rate of Injury and Illness Cases per 100 Full-Time Workers Meat Products Industry Total - United States 1991-2007



rate of 6.2 to a rate 5.5 in 2007; a reduction of over 11%. Both the total incidents rate and the more severe lost workday case rate currently stand at all time lows for the industry.

It should be noted that BLS converted from use of the Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) codes to the North American Industrial Classification System (NAICS) in 2003. Though this resulted in significant changes for many industry groups, particularly in data comparison capability, changes to the meat industry categories – red meat slaughtering, processing, and all poultry operations – were essentially unaffected.

Voluntary Guidelines

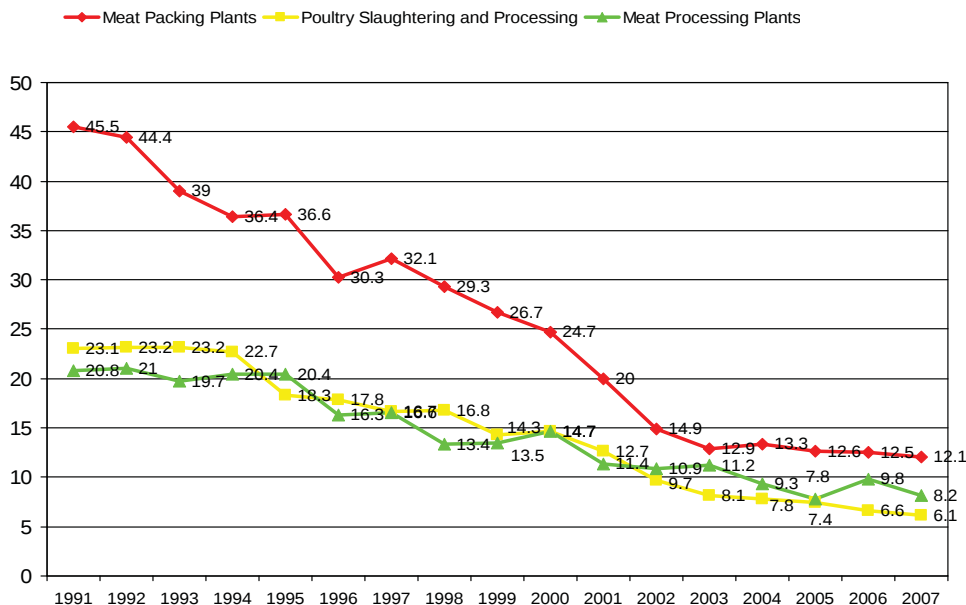
In 1990, the U.S. meat industry, together with OSHA and the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union, developed Voluntary Ergonomic Guidelines for the Meat Packing Industry—guidelines that OSHA called a “model” for other industries. Since then, the meat industry has been successful in implementing these programs and reducing the

number and severity of injuries. The key to these successful guidelines are their flexibility and specificity to the meat industry.

The goal of the guidelines formulated by AMI and OSHA is to improve ergonomics in the meat and poultry industry and to prevent the occurrence of Musculoskeletal Disorders (MSDs) in the workplace. MSDs are caused by combinations of repetitive motions, awkward postures or work positions, and/or exertions of significant force – usually, occurring over a long period of time. There are numerous other potential factors, but these three are often prevalent in the meat industry, and likely account for the majority of MSDs. The goal of any ergonomics program is to reduce, to the greatest extent possible, the physiological cost of performing the work. The Meat Packing Ergonomics Guidelines outline four major elements for implementing a successful ergonomics strategy:

- Workplace analysis
- Hazard prevention and control
- Medical management
- Training and education

Rate of Injury and Illness Cases per 100 Full-Time Workers Meat and Poultry Industry Sectors – United States 1991-2007



Dramatic reductions in the rate of illness and injury at U.S. meat packing plants speak to the value of voluntary, industry specific worker safety and ergonomics programs. While there is more progress to be made in enhancing workplace safety, the meat and poultry industry recognizes that ensuring the health and safety of its workers is the right thing to do—and makes good business sense.

Voluntary ergonomic guidelines encourage employers to take a series of steps in implementing a comprehensive ergonomics program. These steps fall into four categories:

Work Site Analysis

Work site analysis identifies any existing problem areas and evaluates conditions and operations for potential hazards. The goal of work site analysis is to recognize, identify and evaluate ergonomic hazards.

Hazard Prevention and Control

After a detailed analysis has been performed and ergonomic hazards have been identified, steps need to be taken to prevent and/or minimize these hazards.

In some cases ergonomic hazards may be prevented through effective design of the workstation, tools and job. An effective program will include the following:

- Engineering controls — Make the job fit the person by designing or modifying work areas, work methods and tools to eliminate potential MSD risks to the greatest extent possible.
- Work practice controls — An effective prevention and control program includes procedures for safe and proper work that are understood and followed by managers, supervisors and workers. The key factors of such controls are (1) proper work techniques (e.g. proper cutting and lifting techniques), (2) employee conditioning, or break-in, periods, and (3) regular monitoring, feedback, maintenance, adjustments and enforcement.
- Personal protective equipment (PPE) — PPE should be chosen with ergonomic stressors in mind. PPE should be provided in a variety of sizes, should accommodate the physical requirements of workers and the job and should not contribute to extreme postures and/or excessive forces.

- Administrative controls — There are several administrative controls that can be used to reduce the duration, frequency and severity of exposure to ergonomic stressors. For example, rest breaks and job rotations can relieve fatigued muscles. Job enlargement combines two or more jobs to reduce repetition and utilize varying work patterns.

Medical Management

An effective medical management program will use early identification and treatment methods to eliminate or reduce the risk of employees' developing MSDs. According to the guidelines, a physician or occupational health nurse (OHN) with training in the prevention of MSDs should supervise the program.

Each work shift should have access to health care providers to facilitate treatment, surveillance activities and recording of information.

The medical management program should address the following issues:

- Injury and illness record keeping
- Early recognition and reporting
- Systematic evaluation and referral
- Conservative treatment
- Conservative return to work
- Systematic monitoring
- Adequate staffing and facilities

Training and Education

The purpose of training and education is to ensure that employees are sufficiently informed about the ergonomic hazards around them. This should enable employees to participate actively in their own protection. Training allows managers, supervisors and employees to understand ergonomic and other hazards associated with a job or production process, their prevention and their medical consequences.

The guidelines advise that training programs should include all affected employees, engineers and maintenance personnel, supervisors, managers and health care providers. The program should be designed and implemented by qualified persons and presented in appropriate language and at a level of understanding of those being trained.

AMI's Position

The American Meat Institute strongly supports continuous improvements in worker and workplace safety. To that end, the AMI Board of Directors has made worker safety a "non-competitive" issue, and actively encourages sharing of information among all member companies to promote industry-wide safety improvements.

AMI's Worker Safety Committee actively works on various projects with the goal of continued reduction of injury and illness rates. Among other things, this includes development and presentation of the annual AMIF Conference on Worker Safety, Health and Human Resources, the premier meat industry event on worker and workplace safety. Recently, the committee and AMI staff have also developed a new Web site, <http://www.workersafety.org>, to provide a resource on safety issues and aids for the entire meat industry.

For more information on worker safety in the meat and poultry industry, contact AMI at (202) 587-4200 or visit www.MeatAMI.com.

Helpful Links

American Meat Institute
<http://www.meatami.com>
<http://www.workersafety.org>

National Safety Council
<http://www.nsc.org>

Occupational Safety and Health Administration
<http://www.osha.gov>