Further discussion surrounding consumer education generated the following ideas:

- Work more collaboratively with consumer advocacy groups.
- Proactively address the need to have a plan in place to reassure consumers in the event of another beef safety issue, whether real or perceived.
- Identify spokespeople and information sources that are deemed credible by consumers. Veterinarians, university researchers, as well as farmers and ranchers, were all identified as spokespeople whose messages would resonate with consumers. Retailers and foodservice operators also represent a critical link, as they are the interface between the industry and end users.
- Utilize consumers who demonstrate reasonable behavior and allow food safety risks to be put in perspective to connect with other consumers and communicate food safety messages.

The beef industry works aggressively to promote product benefits related to both nutrition and safety. One summit participant asked if there are opportunities to incorporate the safety attributes of beef into those promotional messages.

Conclusion

The beef industry has learned there is no “silver bullet” when it comes to creating a safe product. Years of industry research and collaboration have proven that a multiple hurdle approach is the best way to create the safest product possible. A similar multiple hurdle approach with collaborative efforts from industry, educators and government may be the best way to inform consumers about beef safety and the industry’s commitment to providing the safest product possible.

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Consumer food safety education took a more collaborative turn when the Partnership for Food Safety Education was founded in 1997. This not-for-profit organization of government agencies, food industry representatives, nutrition and food safety professional organizations, as well as consumer groups established a mission to educate consumers using four simple practices to protect themselves from bacteria (BAC) and reduce the risk of foodborne illness.

The 1993 E. coli O157:H7 outbreak associated with hamburgers from a fast food establishment and subsequent actions by the USDA Food Safety Inspection Service (FSIS) created the need to reach out more aggressively to consumers about food safety education. When FSIS declared E. coli O157:H7 an adulterant and required safe food handling labels on raw meat and poultry, it became clear that consumers needed more detailed food safety communications.

“At this point, we have a new scenario for foodborne disease outbreaks,” said Bruhn. “Outbreaks now involve low level or intermittent pathogen contamination versus the large number of microorganisms that were associated with historic outbreaks.” In present-day outbreaks, according to Bruhn, the source of contamination is not often easily identified and outbreak investigations are complex and typically involve multiple locations throughout the country.

“Food safety education cannot be an isolated task,” said Bruhn. “What is said by consumers about their behavior and what they retain from educational programs are all affected by issues that arise.”

Percentage of consumers that feel the beef industry should provide a product free of bacteria and foodborne pathogens versus those consumers that feel that proper handling and cooking by end users is the key to safely enjoying foods and avoiding foodborne illness.

One such issue that may adversely affect consumer confidence, even though it is not a food safety issue, is a domestic outbreak of foot and mouth disease (FMD). Based on consumer research funded by the Beef Checkoff, most consumers do not realize that FMD is strictly a zoonotic disease.

Since FMD is so contagious among cloven-hoofed livestock, an outbreak in the United States could have huge economic repercussions. Media coverage of the issue could be extensive as demonstrated when outbreaks occurred in the United Kingdom.

According to checkoff-funded research, most consumers incorrectly believe FMD affects humans (72 percent) and that they can contract it from infected meat (69 percent). Consumers also confuse FMD with bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), which does have food safety implications. An FMD outbreak would likely create supply issues due to the necessity to control livestock movement, and according to checkoff research, many consumers would associate a shortage of beef in grocery stores with a safety recall.

These data demonstrate the need for a comprehensive communications strategy that could be implemented immediately to preserve consumer confidence in the event of a domestic FMD outbreak. Consumer research revealed veterinarians are perceived to be one of the most credible sources of information. The current checkoff-funded communication strategy, developed in cooperation with other livestock groups, is based on the consumer research and integrated with state and federal animal health communications programs.

The presentations about consumer opinions of beef safety issues prompted discussions among the Summit participants on ways to more effectively integrate consumer education with the industry’s safety initiatives. Being proactive and having communication messages in place is critical, as was demonstrated by the FMD presentation as well as the industry’s past experiences with BSE. Having a consistent, uniform, science-based message from all segments of the industry that a problem has been identified and is being addressed helps to preserve consumer confidence.

The general media’s tendency to focus on negative issues was described as one of the largest challenges to effective communications with consumers about beef safety. One participant cited the E. coli O157:H7 outbreak associated with spinach (September 2006) and the favorable coverage that the beef industry received regarding its efforts to address safety issues. “It took another industry’s crisis before our strides to improve beef safety were positively portrayed by the media,” noted the participant.