

Two words that can strike fear into the heart of any foodservice operator: product recall. The very thought of a recall, in fact, conjures up images of frantic employees pulling thousands of dollars' worth of food off the shelves and getting rid of it—if it hasn't already been sold to patrons.

“By the time we hear about a recall, the food already may have been eaten,” says Martin T. Cowley, senior manager, restaurant design construction for Disneyland Resort, in Anaheim, CA, who has been working with the California Health Department to study ways to create a more efficient notification system. “Recalls are something that we as operators are all very concerned about, but there’s just no unified strategy for dealing with them.”

Part of the challenge lies in who is responsible for recalls, and how the information is conveyed. Most operators get news of a recall in one of three ways: from the local health department; through alerts provided by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA); or through their supplier.

The USDA and the FDA are not actually authorized to “order” a recall, and the onus is on the product’s manufacturer or distributor to voluntarily carry out the recall of any products regulated by the USDA (meat, poultry

USDA RECALL CLASSIFICATIONS

Class I	This is a health hazard situation where there is a reasonable probability that the use of the product will cause serious, adverse health consequences or death.
Class II	This is a health hazard situation where there is a remote probability of adverse health consequences from the use of the product.
Class III	This is a situation where the use of the product will not cause adverse health consequences.

and eggs) or the FDA (seafood, imported foods). And even with the most well-meaning and diligent suppliers, days can pass before the operator gets the word.

50% RECOVERY RATE

According to a study conducted earlier this year at Ohio State University, in fact, only about half of the meat and poultry recalled in the U.S. between 1998 and 2002 because of suspected health hazards was actually recovered. According to the study’s co-author Neal Hooker, assistant professor of agricultural, environmental and development economics at Ohio State, this suggests that regulations enacted in the late 1990s may not be doing enough to ensure the safety of the domestic food supply, because product can be shipped out before test results even come in.

“Work with suppliers you trust,

and establish good communication with them,” suggests Cowley. In many cases, a distributor will also be able to help respond to a recall situation. “And be very proactive. Stay in touch with the local health department. Subscribe to the alerts that are available from the government. And remember that, when dealing with recalls, time is the most critical factor.”

“It can be a fulltime job, monitoring for these alerts,” notes Robert Waite, president of FoodTrack (www.foodtrack.net), a 10-year-old company that provides food incident surveillance to foodservice and supermarket clients, as well as manufacturers. “We’re monitoring the news wires, newspapers, TV and radio transcripts, government web sites and list-serves in real-time, 24/7. This allows the operator to focus on response to events that threaten the integrity of their products and value of their corporate reputation.”

Using a sophisticated, web-based monitoring system and parameters that can be customized to client’s specific needs, FoodTrack is able to provide alerts within 15 minutes of initial notification on foodborne illness outbreaks, product recalls and accidental contamination, as well as biosecurity and terrorist events.

TRACKING, FROM OUTBREAK TO RECALL

Although Waite believes that the regulators are doing their jobs to protect the public health, the complicated, multilayered nature of the business does present major challenges to the operator. Being able to track the progress of a foodborne outbreak—from initial reports of illness to isolation of the cause—would also be useful, so that an operator could proactively contact a supplier if a particular product came under suspicion, and possibly even avert a bad purchase. “Outbreaks can turn into recalls, and if you’re watching closely, you can sometimes see it coming,” notes Waite. But again, monitoring such developments is often low on the priority scale for many busy restaurateurs.

“With all the products out there, there are more chances than ever that something will fall through the cracks,” says Waite. “In the event of a major contamination, could you afford to wait for that information through normal channels?”