

Created with food safety in mind

California-based Brawley Beef's new plant is designed to ward off pathogens.

By Brent Langman,
Senior Editor

The shining 372,000-square-foot, state-of-the-art Brawley Beef facility, Brawley, CA, is expected to process more than 500,000 beef carcasses a year. For eight cattle feeders in California's Imperial Valley and Western Arizona, the new processing capacity fills a void that has developed over the past several years due to the disappearance of more than 50 percent of the processing capability in the Southwest. While not a cooperative, the operation will process cattle exclusively supplied by eight designated feeders, who are Brawley's sole financial investors. The initial slaughter volume is set at 1,200 head per day, but the plant is capable of handling from 1,600 to 2,400 head per day.

Photo: CALF News Cattle Feeder



Greg Beck

As a feeder-owned operation, the Brawley facility design departs from tradition. Visitors can view the process through windows, a rarity in meat plants. Greg Beck, president and chief operating officer, formerly with Sunland Beef, a division of Smithfield Food's Packerland division, says the differences begin at cattle delivery.

Brawley Beef is equipped with the latest livestock handling and



Steam vacuuming is just one of several interventions use by Brawley Beef to keep pathogens at bay in the industry's newest beef-processing facility.

processing technologies to assure a safe, tender, and most importantly, consistent beef products. The bulk of the animals, grain-fed Holsteins, are transported to the facility in specially designed trucks with air-ride suspension to decrease bruising, a source of substantial loss for many packers.

In the holding area, Brawley contracted with Temple Grandin, noted animal-handling expert, to include new techniques to minimize stress associated with holding pen activity. The covered pens have raised floors so cattle can walk directly off the trucks rather than navigate the traditional ramped dock. Throughout the live animal handling area, only slight grades are used for sufficient drainage. The alleyways are designed with slight curves and gradual inclines or

declines so animals can always see other animals ahead of them.

At slaughter, the linear system is designed with multiple food-safety intervention techniques. Steam vacuuming, organic acid sprays, wash and rinse, and thermal pasteurization are used to eliminate pathogens. Hides are tube-fed to a separate building for processing to remove this potential contaminate from the food-processing area. At evisceration, offals and variety meats are sorted and chilled immediately to improve shelf life. Brine chillers, vacuum bagging, blast freezing, and flash freezing processes are used to ensure quality.

Even the coolers at Brawley Beef have been designed to exacting standards. The long, narrow design of the plant's coolers facilitates fast

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carcass cooling. The rooms are 24 feet tall with the fans located above the hanging level of the carcasses. The cool air then drops to the bottom part of the room. The cooling units are located in a separate room, keeping the heat generated by the motors away from the cooling area. A series of smaller coolers are used to sort carcasses into like groups.

At fabrication, the cutting tables are designed to limit crevices and the working areas have been impregnated with an antibacterial agent to combat pathogen growth. In packaging, a new vacuum-packaging system uses computer controls to seal a package once the proper level of vacuum has been reached. An innovative packaging standard for ground beef chubs has also been installed. To extend packaging by up to 10 additional days, Brawley employs a system to crust-freeze the



The fabrication tables at Brawley Beef are designed with limited crevices to eliminate pathogen harborage.

outside three-eighths of the cylinder.

While the company's future plans are to develop a line of value-added products, its current focus is case-ready marketing. Thanks to a consistent supply of similar cattle, expects to produce a quality product with a longer shelf life to

address universal food-safety demands.

According to Beck, nearly 12 percent of the U.S. population lives within 300 miles of the plant. "This will be one of the most vertically integrated beef businesses in the world," he concludes. *NP*

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