New York Plays Big Role in National Seafood Safety Initiative

Traditionally, food safety inspection programs have been based on industry compliance with specified practices and random spot checks by regulatory agencies. But now a state-of-the-art approach to food safety control, in which food processors and producers identify and anticipate potential food safety hazards and apply science-based controls to prevent these hazards before they occur, is being adopted by industry and regulatory agencies in the United States and around the world. This new system, called HACCP (Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point) is currently being applied to the production of seafood and other food products.

A new Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulation required all seafood processors to develop and implement a HACCP plan by December 18, 1997, to control significant food safety hazards associated with their products and processing operations. Additional requirements include new sanitation-monitoring and record-keeping procedures and special requirements for importers, smoked fish processors, and molluscan shellfish shippers and processors.

Thousands of traditional seafood processors, in addition to seafood wholesalers, distributors, packing docks, shellfish shippers, and even fishermen in the United States, are affected by this new FDA regulation. In New York alone, over 600 seafood businesses are likely to have to comply. These diverse businesses contribute over $1 billion to the economy of the state and play a significant role in regional, national, and international seafood markets.

New York also has one of the largest seafood wholesale distribution systems in the country, including the largest wholesale seafood market, Fulton Market in New York City.

Sea Grant anticipated the challenges of helping this vast network make the transition to the new HACCP system. Ken Gall, New York Sea Grant seafood specialist, has coordinated an ongoing HACCP program initiative since 1990. Initial work focused on pilot and demonstration projects conducted in collaboration with the FDA, National Marine Fisheries Service, and national, regional, and local industry trade organizations, such as the National Fisheries Institute, New England Fisheries Development Association, and the New York Seafood Council.

Projects to develop and test models HACCP plans with key processing industry sectors, such as smoked fish processors, have also been conducted. A national Sea Grant Forum on Seafood Quality and Safety that Gall helped plan and conduct resulted in a project to develop a Seafood HACCP Alliance for Training and Education. This national initiative involved federal and state regulatory agencies, Sea Grant and university seafood experts across the nation, and the seafood industry. Its goal was to develop a standardized HACCP training program for seafood industry personnel and federal and state regulators across the country and to develop educational materials and identify research needs that would facilitate the implementation of the HACCP system for seafood products. Gall was instrumental in mobilizing the resources of national, state, and local programs to conduct training programs and to facilitate the implementation of HACCP systems in seafood businesses in New York.

Almost all the firms that completed training have successfully developed and implemented HACCP plans for their operations. Hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of improvements in facilities and equipment have been made in large centralized markets like Fulton and by a variety of other processing and wholesale distribution firms. New York companies have also played a significant role in helping processing firms around the world that sell their products in the state to develop and implement HACCP systems for their own operations. Special projects to develop training materials in other languages have greatly assisted with this effort.

Many regulatory, academic, and industry experts agree that the seafood industry's transition to HACCP-based operations could not have been accomplished without the Seafood HACCP Alliance training effort. The ultimate impact will be safer and higher quality seafood available in New York and across the country and the opportunity to maximize the value of our limited seafood resources.

Left: For his commitment to HACCP training efforts, New York Sea Grant's Seafood Specialist Ken Gall received an Outstanding Outreach Program Award at Sea Grant's northeast regional meeting this spring. Photo courtesy of New York Sea Grant.