

Engineering success

AS SEEN IN
THE NATIONAL PROVISIONER
THE AUTHORITY ON THE BUSINESS OF MEAT AND POULTRY PROCESSING

The National Provisioner talks with the engineers at some of America's leading meat processors to find out how they make decisions that make their companies profitable.

BY TOM WRAY, ASSOCIATE EDITOR



Name: Tim Biela
Title: Chief food safety officer
Company: American Food Service
Years at company: 15 years
Years in position: 5 years
Number of employees/plants reporting: responsibilities at all 5 plants

NP: How much throughput does your plant have?

Biela: Including all five facilities we can produce just over 2 million pounds of ground beef per day.

NP: What is your main role in engineering for the company?

Biela: From the food-safety perspective, making sure of the sanitary design of equipment and insuring sanitary controls during capital installation projects while plants are operating, plus the regulatory aspects during these kinds of projects.

NP: How do you manage and maintain your company's standards in different situations?

Biela: We have standard operating procedures for all of the things I just mentioned. Say we're adding capacity: there's a planning process that has to be completed prior to ... the actual installation of any process equipment so people from all the areas of the plant including the plant manager are aware of what is going on and what will

happen during the project. Those communications are required through standard operating procedures which document that this has to be part of the process.

NP: How much of your company's operating budget is for infrastructure, equipment and maintenance?

Biela: It's typically on an annual basis; we'll have \$2 million of capital expenses for repairs and maintenance. From a capital projects standpoint, over the past five years we've spent \$53 million on improvement projects from over \$450 million in sales for 2007. The total for a 5 year period is close to 10% of our actual annual sales for a one year period. We've had in excess of \$4 million for ongoing capital improvement projects for 2007.

NP: What improvements have you made over the past year?

Biela: Process improvements have been more about more cost-efficient refrigeration technologies both for our facilities and our process. That's been a critical one. We've also done a lot on energy-saving projects as well.

NP: How does your company handle the relationship with suppliers as it concerns tech upgrades and maintenance?

Biela: A variety of ways. We have ongoing relationships with all of our major equipment suppliers. We utilized them not just for initial purchase, but we partner with them for preventative maintenance, training, parts and supplies.

NP: How do you deal with increasing concerns about food safety with the demands of production?

Biela: Again, it's all dependent on our standard operating procedures; the day-to-day activities to keep the plant in operation. The procedures for capital projects, construction activities, etc.. are all written down, and our employees are trained on the procedures. This way we insure sanitary operations which guarantee a food safe product.

NP: What was the most recent project you carried to completion? What were the challenges? What would you change in hindsight? What was the final result?

Biela: The most recent one would be the installation of new refrigeration equipment at our facility in Texas. There's always that challenge of maintaining continuous supply to customers while making major changes. We had to shut down that capacity for a relatively long period of time. We pushed production to other locations to maintain supply, plus we planned ahead. You've got to have things like plumbing and electrical all in place and a plan to pull out old equipment and install new equipment and get it fully operational in the shortest amount of time as possible. We spent so much time in planning that it worked exceptionally well. It was extremely successful. It takes a lot of planning to make it very successful. It was a very big part of our capital projects schedule for the year.