

Is there a Katrina in your food supply?

We all sat in utter disbelief as New Orleans suddenly began to drown on that Tuesday morning. The aftermath was and continues to be a shock to our national nervous system. The infrastructure collapsed before our very eyes. What we witnessed was not just the demise of housing, law enforcement, communications, business and transportation, but of everything.

The food and water infrastructure collapsed under the weight of a city drowning. These shocking events highlighted the fact that the food industry carries more than enough vulnerabilities to provide ample opportunity for a similar catastrophe with or without a hurricane.

You don't have to delve too deeply into the chaos of Katrina to see similarities that could easily repeat themselves in food and agriculture. In the Reality Based Exercises (RBX)SM we have conducted with the food industry and regulators across the nation, we have found that four key elements are addressed as each crisis unfolds.

1 Leadership. In New Orleans, the decision-making model broke. The leadership fragmented the instant the unexpected flowed through the levees. In the food world, we are already fragmented. At each level of government there exist competing agendas, protocols and policies that taken individually are well-meaning and effective. But pushed together in an uncertain and ill-defined crisis, these inconsistencies will kindle leadership conflicts not only within but also between federal, state and local agencies. With chaos ruling the streets of New Orleans, the business infrastructure was called upon to play a larger role than planned. The lesson: *Industry must join government at the preparedness table before the event.*

2 Operations. Industry's operational effectiveness in rapidly growing, processing and distributing our food products across the country and the globe provide both strength and weakness. This rapid distribution of product is the Achilles' Heel of an otherwise incredibly efficient food-

supply chain. The near-instantaneous impact of a widespread contamination will not only have major economic and health implications, but it will also instill panic, confusion and a lack of confidence in our industry and government. The shortages of the basic necessities could result in widespread looting and hoarding of food. The lesson: *In the absence of order, chaos will proliferate. We must be prepared to manage the chaos as a nation and an industry.*

3 Communications. Communications in our industry are stovepiped much like we saw in New Orleans. Should a major food crisis unfold, would we be able to communicate effectively within our business, our industry, the government and the public? We heard a lot about the inability to communicate during 9/11, and after four years, Katrina proved that not much has changed. Rather than looking to government for communications bridges, here's the lesson: *Industry must be ready to provide the communication links and protocols during a crisis. These protocols must be installed, tested and exercised before a crisis.*

4 Finance. No matter how committed the government remains to sustain the business infrastructure, the bailout is just too large. Businesses will be left to fend for themselves while the government looks after the public welfare. The lesson: *These financing protocols must be established and in place prior to an incident. During chaos is not the time to be shopping for financial stability.*

We need the government to pull with all its energy in a crisis to play out the role of guardian that only the government can fulfill. But the lessons of our major crises in recent times indicate that we, the food industry, need to be ready to step up and take care of our business, our employees and the community. *In a crisis, we are all in this together. We must prepare as such.*

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Gordon Meriwether

FOOD SYSTEMS insider

In this issue...

Fueling
the fire 4

FSI Trends 10

FSI Insights 10, 14

Food System in
Action: Ranch
improves via
system approach . . . 12

FSI Numbers 14

Media Watch: Not
evacuating from
responsibility 16

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