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CO meat packaging unfairly maligned

By Daren Cornforth

my view

In the early 1900s, the manufacturers of horsewhips were rightly upset by the invention of the Model T. They quickly recognized that overnight, this new technology would prove superior to the horse and buggy, making horsewhips — their bread and butter — a useless artifact of the past. How right they were.

A similar showdown between companies using practices of the past and their upstart competitors is taking place in the meat-packing industry and is proving to be a contentious issue in states such as Utah where meat-packing plants are important employers. The new technology incorporates the use of small amounts of carbon monoxide as a component of a sealed-atmosphere package that helps ensure long-term quality and freshness for various meat products.

Unfortunately, despite the fact that it is an innovative technology that benefits both consumers and processors, the use of CO meat packaging has been unfairly maligned. Opponents charge that it tricks consumers into thinking that spoiled meat is fresh and that the technology has not been sufficiently tested and thoroughly approved. In reality, the use of CO greatly extends the shelf life of meat products, reducing costs to consumers and ensuring that stores can remain fully stocked with products sought after by shoppers. In addition, it's been in use in various countries for more than a decade and has been approved for use by the U.S. government on three separate occasions. It's a win-win proposal for both consumers and retail stores.

What is indisputable is that fresh meat packaged in CO will maintain a desirable red color — and a higher quality — for an extended period of time. Meat exposed to the air we breathe oxidizes and quickly turns brown. Eventually, because of the premature browning, grocers are forced to throw the meat away, driving up costs. The detractors of CO meat packing have tried to turn one of its best qualities — its ability to keep meat red — into its biggest public relations problem, falsely charging that the appealing red color masks spoilage and fools consumers. But consumers aren't dummies.

Fresh meat has many of the same processing and distribution issues as fresh milk. Both are highly perishable, requiring refrigeration during distribution and display at the grocery. And like meat in CO packaging, milk will not always change color due to bacterial growth. Consumers rely on taste, odor and consistency to detect spoiled milk. The same holds true for meat. In fact, meat that is spoiled would not only project a fairly offensive odor but would likely be slimy and seemingly ready to burst out of its package.

CO is a significant component of wood smoke, used to preserve meat and fish products. "Tasteless smoke," which consists primarily of CO, has been approved since 2002 for preservation and color stability of raw tuna. The FDA has approved the use of CO in meat-packing on three separate occasions.

So what's all the fuss about? The controversy is being generated by the company making the horsewhip, which is seeing its market share threatened by a new and better technology. The company markets extracts that also preserve the freshness of meat, albeit for a shorter period of time, in a similar packaging system. If CO wins the day, they lose. It's as simple as that.

Every technology has its day in the sun and is eventually replaced by a newer, more efficient way of doing things. That's why we can all walk into a grocery store and buy fruit from South America and vegetables canned months ago. To ensure the freshest, highest quality meat for America's consumers, we need to make way for new technologies. The time has come to put away the horsewhip away and step into a Hummer.

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