

**Agricultural Research Service
National Program 108
Food Safety**

2021 Annual Report



**Agricultural Research Service
U.S. Department of Agriculture
George Washington Carver Center, Beltsville, Maryland**

Executive Summary

Background

The National Food Safety Research Program (NP 108) is one of 15 National Programs (NP) within the USDA-Agricultural Research Service (ARS) Office of National Programs (ONP). The National Programs are organized within four broad Program areas: Nutrition, Food Safety and Quality (NFSQ); Animal Production and Protection (APP); Natural Resources and Sustainable Agricultural Systems (NRSAS); and Crop Production and Protection (CPP). The National Food Safety Research Program (NFSRP) is part of NFSQ. <http://www.ars.usda.gov/research/programs.htm>.

The National Program structure allows ARS to collaborate with other researchers to address food safety issues, needs or concerns. Within other ARS National Programs, in particular (NP107) Human Nutrition; (NP306) Product Quality and New Uses; (NP103) Animal Health; (NP106) Aquaculture; (NP303) Plant Diseases, and (NP216) Sustainable Agricultural Systems Research; nationally within the U.S. Federal Government, industry and academia; and internationally with public health/food safety regulatory agencies and research institutes in over 60 different countries.

NP108 Vision Statement:

The Program's **vision** is to enhance and protect public health and agriculture through the development of technologies, strategies, and data that safeguard food from pathogens, toxins, and chemical contaminants during production, processing, and preparation, thus increasing the safety of the U.S. food supply.

Mission Statement:

The Program's **mission** is to provide through research, the means to ensure that the U.S. food supply is safe for consumers; and that food and feed meet foreign and domestic regulatory requirements. Food safety research seeks ways to assess, control or eliminate potentially harmful food contaminants, including both introduced and naturally occurring pathogenic bacteria, non-pathogenic bacteria, viruses and parasites; bacterial toxins, fungal toxins (mycotoxins) and plant toxins; non-biological-based chemical contaminants, and foreign materials. Food safety is a global issue; thus, the research program involves both national and international collaborations through formal and informal partnerships. Accomplishments and outcomes are utilized in national and international strategies delivering research results and advances to regulatory agencies, commodity organizations, industry, academia, other researchers, and consumers.

Current Relationship of this National Program to the USDA, REE and ARS Strategic Plans and Goals:

As of 2018, NP108 falls under USDA Strategic Goal 7. To Provide All Americans Access to a Safe, Nutritious, and Secure Food Supply. <https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/usda-strategic-plan-2018-2022.pdf>

As of 2018, NP108 falls under Research, Education and Economics (REE) Goal 5, Food Safety. Currently the REE Strategic Plan is being reconsidered under five (5) new “Strategic Themes”. NP108 Food Safety is scheduled to be combined with Human Nutrition under a new Theme entitled “Food and Nutrition Translation”, and REE focus area “Food Safety and Health Promotion.”

Relationship of National Program 108 to the ARS Strategic Plan: Outputs of NP108 research support the “Actionable Strategies” associated with the performance measures outlined in the ARS Strategic Plan for 2018-2020. <https://www.ars.usda.gov/ARSUserFiles/00000000/Plans/2018-2020%20ARS%20Strategic%20Plan.pdf>

Strategic Goal 1.2 - Protect food from pathogens, toxins and chemical contamination during production, processing, and preparation.

Performance Measure 1.2. Develop new technologies that assist ARS customers in detecting, identifying, and controlling foodborne diseases associated with the consumption of animal products that affect human health.

Research Action Plan

Component 1. Foodborne Contaminants

The production, processing, and distribution system for food in the U.S. remains a diverse, extensive, and easily accessible system. An open system is vulnerable to the introduction of contaminants through natural processes and global commerce, and by intentional means. Thus, the food supply (food system) must be protected from pathogens, toxins, and chemical/physical contaminants that cause disease or harm to humans and/or animals/plants within that system. The NFSRP seeks ways to assess, characterize, control and/or eliminate potentially harmful food contaminants. The NFSRP conducts research and provides scientific information and technology to producers, manufacturers, regulatory agencies, to support their efforts to provide a secure, affordable, and safe supply of food, fiber, and industrial products to consumers.

Problem Statement 1. Population Systems

The goal of this research area is to identify and characterize the movement, structure, and dynamics of microbial populations within food -animal and -plant systems, across the entire food continuum, from production through processing. At the microbial level, the diversity and complexity within environments and food matrices may alter the makeup of the populations, as well as cause change through spatial and temporal influences, or by the competitive or synergistic relationships among pathogens and commensals. Microbial populations can influence the safety of food, and the various environments in which they survive determine the success and impact of the microorganism. In turn, microorganism(s) may influence the conditions prevailing within the environment which also impacts their survival, their ability to thrive or alter their genome. An example of identifiable area of study would include biofilms; their architecture, (antimicrobial) resistance, quorum sensing and control mechanisms.

Components and emphasis for understanding and characterizing microbial populations and their environments must include epidemiology, ecology, and host-pathogen relationships. Epidemiologic studies of microbes within their environment, allows an analysis of the population therein. As such, it provides a framework for integration of microbial genomic data with disease, enables the development of improved detection methods, and a mechanism to evaluate risk factors for microbial intervention and/or control. Ecologic studies determine the attributes and changes in various communities, that is, changes to populations in the same space. Such studies allow for a better understanding of the interactions and relationships, and the transmission and dissemination of pathogens and toxins in and among food producing animals and crops.

Host-pathogen relationship studies provide an understanding of the acquisition of genetic traits, such as the development and movement of resistance genes; traits connected with colonization, the evolution of virulence/pathogenicity; and the/any role/influence of commensals. Where appropriate, a more focused “omics” approach (in its broadest sense) to selected research areas will be undertaken to determine the attributes of the ecological communities in which pathogens are found. Knowledge of the attributes, interactions and relationships within the community in which pathogens live is critical to the development of control and intervention strategies.

We will continue, but at a reduced level, an emphasis on mechanisms that allow pathogens to persist in animals and the related environment. This will drive development of mitigation and prevention strategies, as well as guidelines, policy and regulation.

Research Needs

General (animal and plant)

- Improved approaches/designs for microbes based on population-based studies, detection of emerging pathogens, and supplying data for identified data gaps.
- Improved sampling collection protocols to maximize the probability of describing the exceedingly large number of diverse organisms that inhabit ecological communities.
- Data on particular ecological niches or reservoirs for specific pathogens.
- Research to determine why serotypes decrease and re-emerge in production and processing environments.
- Data on factors which enhance or reduce fitness characteristics related to survival and growth and persistent colonization.
- Improved methods that allow evaluation of the impact of intervention or management strategies on microbial contamination throughout the entire food chain from field to plate.

Specific (plant)

- Data on the complex interactions between fungus; crop; environmental factors; and production practices.
- Data on how changes in climate impacts pathogen growth, persistence, pathogenicity and/or virulence.

Anticipated Products

- Improved epidemiological methods that allow the collection of quantitative data on the pathogen load within the food safety continuum.
- Capability to predict how environmental, nutritional, and/or biological factors influence or control the attributes and changes in ecological communities and within microbial populations.
- Continued knowledge for developing appropriate intervention or management strategies based on mechanisms for transmission and dissemination of pathogens and toxins in and among food producing animals and crops.
- A risk-based-framework that allows the integration of omic- or meta- data with infection and/or disease outcome.
- Descriptions of genetic traits associated with colonization, persistence, and the development and evolution of virulence/pathogenicity, including the development and movement of resistance genes, and the role of commensalism and synergies in resistance gene acquisition.

Potential Benefits/Impact

- Improves and enhances knowledge of how microbial populations in agricultural system can potentially affect and impact food safety and public health.
- Delineates how microbial pathogens are transmitted and disseminated in and among food producing animals and plant crops (includes mycotoxin related research) allowing for future development of improved/alternate (environmentally compatible) intervention and/or control strategies.
- The critical factors which influence fitness characteristics related to microbial colonization, persistence, survival, and growth allowing for future development of improved/alternate (environmentally compatible) intervention and/or control strategies.
- How climate change impacts the complex interactions of plant-pathogen infection, growth, persistence, pathogenicity and/or virulence, especially among food crops critical for human and animal consumption; for example, grains, tree and ground nuts, and fresh and dried fruits.

Problem Statement 2. Systems Biology

Systems biology involves an integrated, multidisciplinary, multifaceted approach to study the complexities of components within biological/food systems, a central problem to food safety. Within any system, identifying the players, that is, any bacterial, viral and fungal microorganisms and/or food-borne parasites is critical. Once identified, their role or interactions within the system can be determined through analyses of their genetic makeup, gene expression and products (for example toxins) produced, which directly relates to the microorganism's survival, growth, persistence etc. In order to study systems biology, quantitative technologies such as "omics" [genomics, proteomics, transcriptomics, metabolomics, and metagenomics] combined with bioinformatics can be directly applied. There is an increased need for data gained from systems biology studies to be directly applied for both pre- and post-harvest food safety. For example, whole genome sequencing (WGS) efforts have increased and allowed regulatory agencies and industry to identify and resolve for attribution purposes, some foodborne illness outbreaks. The problem is however, that WGS is being done under the GenFS umbrella on thousands of microorganisms in large part simply to have the genomic data.

https://www.aphl.org/conferences/proceedings/Documents/2018/GenomeTrakr/Brown_2018GENFS_GTmeetingv1.pdf. WGS for sequencing sake, is not a research effort for the NFSRP.

All-to-frequent outbreaks of industry related microorganism contamination emphasizes the continued need to examine pathogens in actual food systems in order to lessen the foods public health risk. Thus, our goal is to utilize omic-technologies and apply them to the study of foodborne pathogens in complex food systems. For example, the Program will obtain and relate data directly to the biology of the microorganism, in order to understand how they fit and/or interact within the systems complexity. Areas of concern include assessing their prevalence as part of elucidating how they cause disease; their fitness (ability to survive in diverse environments); their pathogenicity (ability to infect and cause disease) and virulence (the severity of disease). The prevalence and patterns of contamination in food sectors may vary considerably and needs to be assessed and evaluated carefully. Understanding, fitness, pathogenicity and virulence are critical for intervention and control strategies, modeling, and providing data for the development of risk assessments by regulatory agencies.

Pathogens have the capacity to readily and rapidly adapt and evolve, so pathogenicity and release of virulence factors is an issue at all stages of the food safety continuum. Differences in microbial prevalence, pathogenicity and virulence are observed across different food production and processing systems, at different sampling times, and by using various methods. Contamination patterns reveal variation in fitness, pathogenicity and virulence; the presence of persistent or sporadic strains; evidence of bacterial transfer from production environments to processing, and from processing environments to food.

A new issue of concern is the effect that environmental stressors (pre-/post-harvest, both extrinsic and intrinsic, have on genetic variation. Previous studies for example, <https://journals.plos.org/plosbiology/article?id=10.1371/journal.pbio.2001477> concluded that “environments influence genetic variation as well as selection”; however, there has been no systematic investigation into any linkage between various food environments, foodborne bacteria and mutational outcomes. This could potentially be a critical issue especially in pathogenic foodborne bacteria, for example, those with short generation times, limited extraneous DNA, and high mutation rates.

Ongoing implemented microbial control strategies may lose their effectiveness, forcing the development of new production processes and products to maintain and improve the safety of foods. This, in turn, may restart the cycle of pathogen adaptation resulting from the changed environment and its stresses. Risk assessment(s) conducted by our regulatory stakeholders are also predicated on understanding the pathogen, the dose response, the behavior in foods, and any positive or negative influences that may affect virulence. Assessing the virulence of foodborne organisms and differences among serotypes/strains is critical in implementing new surveillance and intervention strategies. A critical issue within this Problem Statement is the need to clearly differentiate between microorganisms that are relevant to agriculture versus food safety and/or public health.

Research Needs

- Whole genome sequencing (WGS) of specific pathogens to provide data to develop high resolution genotyping and molecular serotyping methods; for identifying virulence attributes and elucidating the differences between pathogens and non-pathogens.
- Identification and characterization of pathogen virulence and fitness factors; how they contribute to pathogen persistence and emergence across the food continuum.
- Data to determine if and/or how virulence is directly related to the infective dose.
- Data on pathogen adaptive responses to intrinsic and extrinsic food stressors such as pH, a_w , temperature, O_2 , and determine their role in pathogenicity and/or persistence.
- Data on the influence on stress-induced mutagenesis; whether there is a mutation rate bias or is it random with respect to for example: adaptation, or virulence/ pathogenicity.
- Data to determine if resistance genes affect virulence, pathogenicity and/or persistence.
- Identification and characterization of fitness and virulence attributes; and the responses of specific pathogens to their environment relative to changes in immunogenicity in the host.
- A detailed investigation of food production and processing environments for bacterial pathogens; and a determination of what genetic and/or environmental factors might contribute to the presence of persistent or sporadic strains and cycle re-emergence of some strains.
- Data on the impact of changing management, production and intervention practices on the incidence of parasites as it relates to foodborne risk.

- Identification and characterization of unique fungal genes for specific biological and physiological functions. For example, how mycotoxin synthesis is transcriptionally regulated during the fungal growth cycle.
- Data on the effect of climate change on mycotoxin production in food crops. How environmental stress factors interact to affect plants, fungal growth, and subsequent mycotoxin synthesis.

Anticipated Products

- Identification of the critical/required genetic components that make specific microorganisms pathogenic versus non-pathogenic, or highly versus weakly virulent.
- Principles relating regulatory mechanisms that control or impact gene expression with a microorganism's biology, for example, pathogenicity and virulence.
- Information relating how foodborne stressors affect mutation rates and bacterial adaptability and pathogenicity.
- Information to explain why some strains are persistent while others are cyclic or sporadic in occurrence.
- Information relating how stress factors such as climate change affect pathogen gene expression and fitness.

Potential Benefits/Impact

- Provides knowledge of which genes are required for a microorganism to become a pathogen.
- Generates data on mutation rates, and genes that contribute to variations in pathogenicity/virulence; and how gene expression is involved in adaptation, and/or persistence in animal, plant and food systems.
- Generates data for the specific development of molecular pathogen phylogenetics, allowing for improved and faster molecular tracking, and determination and characterization (attribution) of outbreaks of foodborne illness by regulatory agencies.
- Supports development of improved risk models, and the revision of risk assessments, e.g., pathogens of low virulence may not be considered as necessary for regulatory control.
- Supports improved mitigation strategies and alternative control measures via identification of genes that code for resistance to antimicrobials and disinfectants, for toxin production; for the ability to grow in specific ecological niches; and for the ability to persist in production and/or processing environments.

Problem Statement 3. Microbial Contaminants: Technologies for Detection and Characterization

The challenge is the unequivocal detection and characterization of pathogenic microorganisms entering the food continuum (both pre- and post-harvest). Detection and characterization are required at the earliest possible stage of the continuum to provide the necessary data for targeted interventions and reducing the need for recall of food products. Where possible, technologies must be developed that allow the most effective and rapid detection and characterization capabilities.

The research will focus on the most promising technologies (depending on the matrix) or point of use, that is, whether the technology will be used for baseline studies, traceability and/or attribution forensics. This requires that decisions be made relative to what should be detected, and the required level of detection and characterization. It is stressed that technologies that have the highest level of detection/characterization capability might not necessarily be the most practical, useful, economically viable, or easily implemented. High-through-put analysis is important, but it may be impractical. Promising technologies will be advanced through technology transfer, and where possible, and appropriate, will undergo validation through national or international bodies from independent academic, industry, and/or government sectors. Studies that suggest minimal outcome or impact will be terminated, and alternate approaches formulated.

A recent issue of concern is the effect of different interventions on bacterial physical structures, and the potential for false negative enumeration. It is known that in response to various stressors some Gram-positive bacteria undergo sporulation, where the developed spores can survive for extended periods of time until germination and outgrowth. Recent data has shown that some Gram-negative bacteria (Salmonella and Listeria) survive by changing into the viable non-culturable (VNC) state. In this state, using classical enumeration methods it has been shown that potential disease pathogens can avoid detection. Consequently, a false negative detection, leading to a false sense of pathogen free foods, an obvious regulatory issue and potential industry nightmare, with outbreaks, illnesses and potential litigation.

Research Needs

- Sampling protocols to maximize the probability of detecting contaminants especially when combined with innovative approaches to sample processing.
- Sample recovery methods with attention to sample preparation as different matrices may present unique problems.
- Methods that do not have a sample or detection bias.
- Methods that reliably differentiate between viable and non-viable agents.
- Methods that negate the issue of both false negative and false positive detection.
- Methods that address bacterial spore germination and detection of VNC microorganisms.
- Methods that are quantitative rather than qualitative or presumptive.
- Technologies that have applications in surveillance systems, for monitoring the food supply and for food defense.
- Technology development that has uniformity of application in both pre- and postharvest production and processing system.

Anticipated Products

- Technologies for multiple agents for trace-back and attribution, and where fiscal and personnel resources are also limited.
- Technologies with improved speed, cost effectiveness, and the capability to provide information for the determination and implementation of subsequent actions.
- Validated technologies that allow uniformity of implementation nationally and internationally.
- Fulfilling requests from stakeholders (USDA-FSIS/industry) for qualitative methods, highly accurate methods with no concerns of false detection.
- Quantitative information that provides useful data for undertaking risk assessments

Potential Benefits/Impact

- Provides validated technologies that have public health, regulatory [monitoring, traceability and attribution], trade, industry, and research use and a commonality of interests between stakeholders and partners.
- Allows improved response times to events, and subsequently allows for the development of mechanisms for treating foods taken out of commerce.
- Provides data to identify areas where interventions are most critically needed, thus assisting the implementation of HACCP programs by Federal agencies, and their regulated industries.
- Enables development and validation of predictive microbial models and helps fill identified data gaps.
- Allows for greater accuracy of research and results. Data can be transformed into usable statistics that can be imparted as part of government agency's regulatory role, or by industry to show that process or product is within regulatory specifications.

Problem Statement 4. Chemical and Biological Contaminants: Detection and Characterization Methodology, Toxicology, and Toxinology

The regulation and control of veterinary drugs, chemical residues, heavy metals, persistent organic pollutants, and biological toxins derived from bacteria, fungi and plants are an integral component of any food safety program. To protect public health and the environment, regulations have been passed and implemented that set limits on contaminants in edible agricultural products. Compliance and enforcement of these regulations is a critical role of the NFSRP's stakeholders that requires the availability of practical detection and characterization methods for veterinary drugs (antibiotics, beta-agonists), chemical residues (dioxins, pesticides), heavy metals (As, Pb, Cd), and organic pollutants (polybrominated diphenyl ethers). In addition to regulatory monitoring, there is a need to understand the biological effects of any inadvertent contamination by humans or animals.

Both toxicological and toxinological studies will also be conducted; where **toxicology** examines the relationship between dose and its effects on the exposed organism, whereas **toxinology** deals specifically with animal, plant, and microbial toxins produced by or accumulated in living organisms, their properties and their biological significance for the organisms involved.

A new area of study under is evaluating the role and effect of mycotoxins in animal feeds. This results from reports of a high prevalence's of certain mycotoxins in feeds. Fusarium toxins such as

deoxynivalenol and zearalenone, and others such as ochratoxin, a mycotoxin produced by different *Aspergillus* and *Penicillium* species are often detected in feeds, often co-occurring with many less well-known mycotoxins, or those that are masked. Development of identification; and intervention and control strategies have now become a critical international food safety, and food trade issue. Research is now specifically directed towards this concern. Research on the development of biocontrol technologies, and crop/fungal/toxin relationships is part of this area and may also impact Problem Statement 2 (Systems Biology).

Several new areas are included in the new Action Plan: specifically: sensing technologies and their application in detecting foreign materials and food adulteration/fraud.

The development of specific (autonomous) sensing technologies, for example, nondestructive spectral sensing technologies, whole-surface [in-line] hyperspectral imaging or Raman spectroscopy are option for reducing the risks of contamination or food adulteration. Developments in this area are critical since regulatory agencies have placed more of the burden of inspection responsibility on producers and processors. Plants are also responsible for meeting other consumer protection issues as determined by regulatory agencies. An example of a recent food contamination issue is the detection of microplastics. Although no concern has been expressed by U.S. regulatory agencies, other international food safety agencies see the issue as a problem. The NFSRP is being proactive in that more studies are needed to detect/monitor these types of foreign materials; determining the risk they pose to human health and food safety/security; and if necessary developing methods to eliminate them from within the food supply.

Food adulteration, and or food fraud are issues of critical global concern, estimated to cost hundreds of \$billions, and projected to cost \$trillions with the next decade. Currently, detection technologies are focused on determining levels of target (known) contaminants. While these technologies can detect know contaminants for example melamine, the real issue is the detection (and characterization) of non-targeted (unknown) contaminants. There are a series of challenges related to these studies, which are appreciated; for example, what is considered an adulterant; developing non-targeted methods that have regulatory approval; and obtaining authentic samples for validation.

Accomplishments and promising technologies within this Problem Statement will be quickly advanced through technology transfer and where appropriate, will undergo validation through national or international bodies such as the Association of Official Agricultural Chemists (AOAC). These studies will require multidisciplinary approaches to meet the challenge, and accomplishments may have far reaching effects regarding food biosecurity, food adulteration/fraud, government regulations and trade issues.

Research Needs

- Accurate, rapid, and easily used analytical detection methods: single/multiclass, single/multi-contaminant analytical methods; lab and field-based methods and instruments for analytical screening.
- Mechanism/action-based bioassays for laboratory and field use.
- Multi-task on/in-line inspection technologies that detect contaminants and quality attributes simultaneously functioning in or near real-time.

- Assays for assessing the efficacy of various processing methods to reduce or eliminate the toxicity in contaminated foods for human/animal consumption.
- Assays that have efficacy in toxico/toxinological studies.
- Intervention methods [bioremediation] to reduce bioavailability.
- Data on the fate and transport of contaminants and their derivatives in food systems and the environment for use in risk assessment by regulatory agencies.
- Provide parameters for regulatory agencies on biological residue depletion and withdrawal rates in animals.
- When requested, develop technologies that have a critical use in food defense.
- Data for use by regulatory agencies on the dose-response relationships and tissue specificity of biological toxins.
- Developing methods for the detection and identification of mycotoxins; and evaluation of mycotoxin toxicity and mechanism of action.
- Examine the negative impacts of mycotoxins on gut composition, functionality and safety in poultry, stressing the particular-effect of mycotoxin combinations.
- Develop automated, low cost, accurate, on-line and hand-held, computerized inspection [sensing] systems.
- Evaluating whether current targeted technologies can be modified to detect non-targeted contaminants. If not, develop non-targeted detection technologies which can undertake the chemical/physical analysis of the entire food matrix.
- Collaborate to determine the efficacy of non-targeted detection in terms of risk.

Anticipated Products

- New and validated technologies that when implemented provide tangible benefits through a more effective and efficient means of monitoring the food supply and environment where food is grown.
- Improved methods that assist researchers conducting toxico/toxinological studies.
- Toxico/toxinological data providing basic and applied knowledge on the effect of exposure to biological toxins.
- Automated sensing systems operate with minimum human intervention and can function despite changes in physical plant structure, and environmental conditions.
- Development of specific food fingerprints which can be used for comparison to questionable products. This will directly assist in reducing food adulteration and food fraud through non-compliant inspections.

Potential Benefits/Impact

- Provides technologies and data for regulatory use, and for better scientific and regulatory decision-making, reducing the likelihood of tolerance limit-errors, protection of consumers, and prevention of economic losses resulting from inappropriate regulatory actions.
- On-line, computerized sensing-systems placed or used strategically will assist and improve the regulatory and in-house inspection system; minimizing the problems of human error and

- variability; and increasing commercial processing productivity and profitability.
- Ensuring the safety/security and integrity of the U.S. and international food supply.

Problem Statement 5. Intervention and Control Strategies

Intervention and control strategies will assist in reducing or eliminating pathogens in food animals and their derived products, seafood, and plant crops during production and processing. Reduced shedding of zoonotic pathogens by food producing animals, and contamination of seafood and plant material will subsequently help reduce the pathogen load during slaughter/ harvesting and subsequent processing and storage. Some food processing/storage technologies inactivate microorganisms to varying degrees; however, the intensities required can result in adverse functional and/or sensory properties, combined with a significant reduction in quality. Consequently, there remains a continued need to develop and subsequently combine new and/or innovative processing technologies. Interventions can be additive and/or synergistic, leading to improved control over pathogen growth without potential changes in food quality or reduction in nutrition. The “hurdle concept” is still considered a viable strategy for intervention and control and should be utilized if possible.

The challenge is that the pathogen load on a product must be significantly reduced by any processing intervention strategy to avoid the consequences in food production resulting from “dirty in, dirty out” processing. There is also the concern that during processing the initial microbial load can be reduced but recontamination occurs with different strains or serotypes present or resident within the processing environment. Such concerns are valid because there are numerous observations that the pathogens present on product prior to processing are different from those found after processing. This variation in pathogen type has significant public health concerns since those pathogens initially found on the product may not be responsible for any foodborne outbreak and/or clinical outcome.

Research should also address, where possible, the integrated lethality for an intervention process. The purpose of the process lethality determination is to provide processors with science-based validation of the effectiveness of a specific process to destroy any microorganism of concern. For example, a thermal process needs to account for many variables including the initial pathogen load, multiple pathogens, pathogen strain variability, food structure, and the heating and cooling profile of the product. In-plant validation should be conducted to verify the intervention(s). The entire lethality process is incorporated into a systems approach to developing pathogen intervention or control strategies.

Problem Statement 5 addresses a wide range of food products including animals, shellfish -seafood, and plant materials; including biocontrol intervention technologies for food crops contaminated by mycotoxins, such a tree nuts, corn and grains. Several new areas of interest and/or concern will be addressed: First, the production of fresh produce, using hydroponic technology. There are many advantages to its utilization including: vertical stacking systems that take up less space, produce can be grown year- round, utilization of less water, lack of use of pesticides and other chemicals, and better control of production systems. Since the technology is relatively new, it behooves an evaluation of any production issues that might express a food safety concern. Second, an increased emphasis on active and intelligent food packaging. This decision is based on changes in consumer preferences for natural or limited processed or preserved foods, and the emergence of various packaging innovations. These innovations can increase both the safety and quality of food products and may significantly contribute to shelf-life extension.

It is critically important within these studies that for development and validation of any process intervention a common or representative core set of pathogens or surrogates be used. This is critically important in order to make the intervention research results comparable both within and external to the Program. Core sets of strains for different pathogens will be made available through the ARS bacterial culture collection, housed at NCAUR, Peoria, IL. If a specific strain is not available in the collection, ONP will facilitate researchers obtaining the appropriate isolate.

It is stressed that research after an approved period that yields no outcome or requires the purchase of expensive equipment will be terminated, and alternate approaches formulated. If alternate approaches cannot be found, the project will be redirected to another priority. Unintended or unanticipated consequences of processing intervention strategies such as changes in virulence, production of toxins, pathogen resistance, selection of resistant strains, or changes in microbial ecology should be considered for further investigation.

Research Needs

- Interventions that prevent colonization or modulate pathogens in the gut; target specific metabolic endpoints; decrease shedding of zoonotic pathogens at the time of slaughter.
- Data on the role of transportation and lairage, slaughter/processing methods, and equipment on pathogen survival, transfer, post-harvest processing and storage.
- Data on the effect of intrinsic (pH, a_w , Eh, nutrient content, antimicrobials, structure) and extrinsic (temperature, RH, O_2) parameters in the production, processing, handling, preparation, and storage of foods. This need includes food preparation and handling for, or by food service operators and/or consumers.
- Data that elucidate the mechanism(s) of pathogen introduction, survival and persistence in shellfish.
- Production and processing intervention/control strategies for pathogen reduction in shellfish.
- Novel antimicrobials for use in poultry and meat processing.
- For plant crops (fresh produce), obtaining data on the role of extrinsic and intrinsic factors on pathogen internalization and/or attachment; and pathogen occurrence and movement.
- For plant crops (fresh produce), obtaining data on the role and/or influence of commensals and/or non-pathogens.
- Identification of the critical control points in both production and processing of fresh produce, plant crops (grains/tree nuts) that can be mitigated through the development and implementation of intervention and control strategies.
- Evaluating hydroponic produce production as a viable technology in terms of: the growth and internalization of pathogens into the produce itself through the nutrient rich water; the potential need to use fungicides to control fungal growth in high moisture systems; the potential need to use insecticides due to insect contamination. The latter may be avoidable by using of hepa-filtration systems or specialized ventilation.
- Biological control strategies to reduce mycotoxin production and contamination of food and feed crops such as corn/maize, cotton seeds, grains and tree nuts. Any new or modified effective biocontrol organisms and delivery systems must not introduce other toxic factors; for example,

for the biocontrol of aflatoxins there should be no introduction or expression of the CPA or fusarium toxin genes.

- Data that assesses the role of chemicals that might act synergistically to enhance accepted interventions.
- Technologies/methods to prevent the growth of pathogenic and spoilage microorganisms in minimally preserved, brined, and fresh-cut foods.
- Utilize physical, chemical, or electronic systems to develop active and/or intelligent storage or packaging technologies, that have both safety and quality performance measures. Where possible link these technologies to sensor systems that can be actively monitored.
- Data on the effect of single and/or combinations of intervention technologies on pathogen reduction. Validate these data through laboratory, pilot-plant processing and commercial processing facilities.
- Data on whether combinations of non-thermal technologies can be incorporated in the hurdle concept; and determine whether single or combinations of non-thermal technologies are more effective if used in combination with traditional interventions.
- Data that evaluates the outcome/impact of intervention options for small and very-small regulated plants.
- Data in intervention effectiveness to be for use in the development of Quantitative Microbial Risk Assessments (QMRAs)
- Data determining the effect of intervention technologies on sensory/quality deterioration, and accumulation of toxic chemical by-products.

Anticipated Products

- Improved intervention strategies to eliminate and/or control microorganisms in animals and their derived products, seafood and plant production, processing and storage systems. Interventions will have the ability to inactivate microorganisms to varying degrees; therefore, the goal is to maximize intervention effectiveness while minimizing sensory/quality deterioration, and possible accumulation of toxic chemical by-products.
- Improved interventions will include development of active and/or intelligent packaging/storage technologies that can enhance and monitor the safety, quality and shelf-life of a food product.
- Improved intervention strategies for various sized operations, utilizing environmentally compatible technologies.
- Improved intervention strategies focusing on the use of combinations of new or innovative technologies for (minimal) processing, thus mitigating the potential for the development of resistance.
- Improved interventions based on an understanding of their modes of action and effects on the microbial ecology of a food product, since inadequate suppression of spoilage could create an opportunity for human pathogen growth and toxin production.

Potential Benefits/Impact

- Provision of critical intervention strategy data to regulatory/action agencies, industry, and commodity organizations that allows for the development, evaluation, and implementation of Good Agricultural Practices (GAPs); Good Manufacturing Practices (GMPs) or regulations based on sound science.
- Enables methods/strategies for the evaluation of any developed interventions and controls.
- Provides production control interventions that reduce downstream contamination, which subsequently reduces disease risk.
- Addressing consumer needs and requirements for increased safety, quality and extension of shelf life of natural or minimally processed food products.

Problem Statement 6. Predictive Microbiology/Modeling; Data Acquisition and Storage; Genomics Database

The tenet of predictive microbiology is that the behavior of any microorganism is deterministic and able to be, within limits, predicted from knowledge of the microorganism itself, and the microorganism's immediate environment. However, it has been stressed by stakeholder groups including industry, that research should also include a greater emphasis on probabilistic modeling to balance the deterministic approaches. This would benefit predicting the behavior of pathogens under stressed conditions (more relevant to the food industry) where growth/inactivation is stochastic.

Behavioral predictions and models are accepted (globally) as an integral part of microbial risk assessment used to support food safety measures by both food safety regulatory bodies and industry. The Program does not develop or conduct Risk Assessments (RA), where RA is defined as the determination of a quantitative or qualitative value of risk related to a specific situation and a recognized hazard. However; the Program does conduct research and provide data when requested by our regulatory stakeholders (FSIS, FDA) for their use in conducting risk assessments.

The Program develops various *modeling programs* including; the **Pathogen Modeling Program** (PMP), a package of models that can be used to predict the growth and inactivation of foodborne bacteria, primarily pathogens, under various environmental conditions. In addition, the **Predictive Microbiology Information Portal** (PMIP) is geared to assist food companies (large and small) in the use of predictive models, the appropriate application of models, and proper model interpretation. The vision is that the PMIP will be the highway for the most comprehensive websites that bring together large and small food companies in contact with the information needed to aid in the production of the safest foods. The PMIP links users to numerous and diverse resources associated with models (PMP), databases (ComBase), regulatory requirements, and food safety principles.

All predictive models developed must be available for external examination, review and utility. If predictive models are developed for internationally accepted high priority pathogen-food combinations, then they could have a major impact for food companies in the U.S. and other countries producing and exporting food to the U.S. This will require significant interactions with risk assessors and involvement in international initiatives such as National Advisory Committee on Microbial Criteria for Foods (NACMCF), Codex Alimentarius Commission (CODEX), Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), and the World Health Organization (WHO). Collaborations with stakeholders must be strengthened with

regards to “what research needs to be conducted” so as to effectively utilize the inherent ARS expertise and modeling systems mechanisms.

Data Acquisition and Information Storage:

ARS continues to develop, and maintains a publically available global food safety database, **ComBase** - a **Com**bined data**Base** for predictive microbiology. *This resource* is the number-one web-based resource for quantitative and predictive food microbiology. ComBase also includes associate members, sponsors, and advisory groups (including a specific scientific advisory group) <https://www.combase.cc/index.php/en/>. ComBase’s main components include a database of observed microbial responses to a variety of food-related environments and a collection of relevant predictive models. The purpose and goal of ComBase is to provide an electronic repository for food microbiology observations and to make such data and the generated predictive tools freely available and accessible to the entire food safety community. Data acquisition and use is an interdisciplinary research challenge that translates into safer products and improved public health.

There are some specific (new) issues regarding ComBase to be addressed in the new Action Plan. At present, users cannot produce probabilistic estimations of microbial behavior based on data and models in ComBase. If the internet fails, there is currently no means to access ComBase. Under FDA-FSMA food companies are increasingly responsible for up-and down-stream nodes that influence food safety. Currently, ComBase has no feature that allows models to be ‘linked’ to predict outcomes of food processes along a simulated supply chain. Use and interpretation of ComBase requires a level of technical expertise that, is generally lacking by ComBase users, especially industry. This can be remedied, in part, by integrating training modules in ComBase that increase understanding and skills. Finally, a long-term issue is still data acquisition. Most data in ComBase was donated by ComBase Partners, ComBase Associates, and via specially funded projects, however, this does not keep pace with the needs of industry and government.

The Food Safety Research Information Office (FSRIO) is part of the NFSRP based at the National Agricultural Library (<https://www.nal.usda.gov/fsrio/about-fsrio-o>). FSRIO’s mission is to provide to the research community and the general public information on publicly funded, and to the maximum extent practicable, privately funded food safety research initiatives for the purpose of preventing unintended duplication of food safety research; and assisting the executive and legislative branches of the Federal Government and private research entities to assess food safety research needs and priorities.

Genomics is a functional and critical part of omic-technologies and is now considered-in-part as a replacement for culture-based techniques. Under the previous Action Plan food safety regulatory agencies planned to implement the increased use of genomics, in particular, partial and/or WGS for both regulatory monitoring, attribution; and potentially for revising risk assessments. Implementation of such a redirection required developing a coordinated system of genomic sequencing technology for routine testing. Critical to the Program was the development of an ARS database from our national and international sequencing/annotation efforts. For this work, a common or representative core set of bacterial pathogens or surrogates was made available, through the Microbial Culture Collected based at NCAUR, Peoria, IL. Additional data from isolates studies obtained from national and international collaborations was also incorporated, along with meta-data descriptors.

This research will continue as part of both the National Initiative “Interagency Collaboration on Genomics for Food and Feed Safety (Gen-FS)” [agencies within the Department of Health and Human Services and the USDA] and an international initiative “Global Microbial Identifier (GMI) **the latter** a global, visionary taskforce including more than 30 countries who share an aim of making novel genomic technologies and informatics tools available for improved global infectious disease diagnostics, surveillance and research, by developing needs and end-user based data exchange and analysis tools for characterization of all microbial organisms and microbial communities.

Research Needs

Modeling

- Models that include an emphasis on probabilistic modeling to balance the deterministic approaches. This includes the influence of challenge strain(s); assessment of a model’s performance; predictive value on extrapolation; and efficacy especially in complex food matrices where the intrinsic and extrinsic parameters may change.
- Data that examines and determines if growth/no-growth interface models predict the probability of growth occurring when a population faces more than one stressor/constraint.
- Models that have utility for risk assessment from both the producer and consumers perspective. There are distinctly different consequences of conservative (over) vs. non-conservative (under) prediction of growth or risk.
- Data that determines if changes in the microorganism(s) themselves occur, due to up/down regulation of genes; quorum sensing; or transfer of genetic information between species.
- Models that predict pathogen and non-pathogen behavior in complex food systems utilizing inactivation data. These types of studies are fundamental to developing Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point (HACCP) systems and regulations. Process risk models for industry that derives predictions for Critical Control Point (CCP) assessment.
- Data that demonstrates how models can be integrated more fully into supply chains [nodes], thereby increasing utility to industry and risk assessors.
- Develop or refine cooking and cooling models; in-particular for Staphylococcus, Bacillus and Clostridium species.
- Develop of refine dose-response curves for E. coli STEC, Listeria and Salmonella pathogens.
- Models that determine the effects of food safety interventions, for example carcass and produce sprays; and physical and chemical interventions, for example: radio frequency, heat, cold and Generally Recognized as Safe (GRAS) chemicals.

Database/Models

- Compile modeling data into a shared informational database through national/ international efforts.
- Write program code linking ComBase records to online databases. This feature will collect attributes for individual records, such as journal article title, abstract, authors, and institution.
- Data collection for specific organism-food combinations, enhance the value for the food systems community. Prioritization will be given to data needed to fill current database gaps, as well as records most sought after by ComBase customers.

- Derive and provide relevant data to regulatory agencies for use in HACCP programs, risk assessments, labeling, persistence, and issues relative to international trade.
- Develop the following as new ComBase initiatives:
 - Producing probabilistic predictions for specific environmental conditions.
 - A stand-alone version of ComBase.
 - Allowing users to link a series of models for process risk estimates.
 - Developing training modules for users with different skill levels.
 - Collecting and archiving new data for high priority pathogen-food combinations.
 - Examining new means to obtain additional data (especially from industry).
- *Continue to develop/update FSRIO website resources; conduct literature reviews supporting food safety, enhance the FSRIO research projects database and publications feed; continue to provide “Meet the Experts” pages; develop and update Website Analytics and Outreach; and work closely with the FSRIO Working Group to ensure material within the website is useful and informative.*

Genomics

- Conduct sequencing and annotation efforts on pathogens of concern that fall under research efforts in various Problem Statements.
- Continue development of a genomic database for identification of microorganisms or development of an identifier of microorganisms as a platform for storing data.
- Develop user friendly systems to aggregate, maintain, share, mine and translate genomic data for microorganisms, for example: the identification of relevant genes or for the comparison of genomes to detect outbreaks and emerging pathogens.
- Implementing an increased focus on bioinformatics (computational biology) as more sequence data becomes available, and the complexity of both the data and questions being asked becomes more sophisticated.

Anticipated Products

- Predictive microbiology [models] that have validity and usefulness while addressing the limitations of the predictive ability. Studies leading to development of these models will include “real food systems” not just broth models or model food systems.
- A shared informational database done in-part through the continued development and expansion of the international collaborative project Combase. This will include data from industry/academia that pertains to “real food production/processing systems.”
- The global community of food risk managers and researchers will utilize ComBase more to design and validate food safety risk management plans. Large, small and very small food companies will develop increasingly accurate risk- management plans via access to a larger and more relevant database, models and associated features.
- FSRIO acting as central location to provide a publicly accessible and searchable research projects database that enables access to current food safety research efforts, outcomes, and the latest up-to-date scientific information.
- A computer-based system and database to aggregate, share, mine and translate genomic data for microorganisms in real-time through a direct link using user-friendly platforms.

- For Gen-FS include: (1) Coordinating research designed to incorporate cutting edge technology to improve identification and sequencing of pathogens obtained from clinical, food, feed, environmental, and animal sources; (2) Developing, documenting, and assessing protocols for comparing genomic sequences; and developing, sharing, and validating methods used to compare sequences and characterize pathogens; for example, single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNP) and whole genome multi-locus sequence typing (wgMLST); (3) Sharing findings that support detection and response to outbreaks, regulatory actions, recalls, and other public health interventions, and research; and (4) Coordinating inter-agency efforts to define genomic determinants for antimicrobial resistance, define mechanisms for transmission within foodborne pathogens, and coordinating activities among agencies in support of the National Action Plan for Combating Antimicrobial Resistant Bacteria (CARB). [*Extracted from the Gen-FS Charter*].

Potential Benefits/Impact

- Generating data on the responses of microorganisms to both defined and changing environmental conditions and translating these data into mathematical models and user-friendly software tools available on the internet at no cost.
- Policy makers and risk assessors will produce more robust risk management plans with greater certainty. These will be used by national and international regulatory and public health agencies, and industry, to assist in ensuring the safety of the food supply.
- FSRIO assists the research community to assess food safety research needs and priorities; allows exploration of current research activities to prevent duplication of efforts allowing for efficient use of research dollars; fosters increased cooperation among individuals and agencies engaged in food safety research; and brings awareness of these services by presenting at scientific conferences and other food safety related meetings.
- An internet-based database ensures that data-mining and acquisition will continue to be coordinated. Genomic database and bioinformatics efforts become increasingly important so that biologists have-the-ability to gain information that will foster technological innovation, and an understanding of the genetic basis of foodborne microorganisms.

Problem Statement 7. Antimicrobial Resistance

The discovery of antibiotics transformed human and veterinary medicine and saved millions of lives in the U.S. and globally. The increase in occurrence of antibiotic-resistant bacteria represents a serious threat to both animal and human health and the economy. The concern for the development of antimicrobial resistant (AMR) bacteria has resulted in the development of both national and international strategies to address the issue. In 2019, the CDC released an AMR threats report identifying AMR bacteria of urgent concern (<https://www.cdc.gov/drugresistance/pdf/threats-report/2019-ar-threats-report-508.pdf>). In 2020, a new National Action Plan for Combatting Antibiotic Resistant Bacteria (CARB) will be released. Both highlight the need for additional research to prevent the spread of AMR. Even though the USDA is not the lead agency for antibiotic use and AMR, USDA-ARS and the NFSRP are an important part of the solution.

Solution oriented-research is needed to understand the factors that promote the development and spread of AMR and to identify solutions to reduce the impact of foodborne AMR bacteria on human health outcomes. Areas of concern include quantifying and assessing the fate of AMR bacteria in production and processing environments with an emphasis on foodborne pathogens. In addition, developing alternative strategies to optimize the use of antibiotics in production animals while maintaining and improving animal health and ensuring safe food for consumers is a critical need.

Currently, the role of antibiotic use on the food animal gastrointestinal microbiome and the development of AMR bacteria is not well defined. Research is needed to determine the impact AMR bacteria associated with food animals on public health outcomes and to identify foodborne pathogens with AMR that are of critical concern and to develop strategies to reduce their occurrence. In addition, there is a critical need for the development of alternatives to antibiotic to reduce the need for antibiotics as well as development of mitigation strategies for foodborne AMR bacteria in food producing animals. These areas are cross-linked with Problem Statements 1 and 2 within this Action Plan.

Research Needs

- Multidisciplinary approaches to identify reservoirs of AMR bacteria and to understand the development, persistence, and transmission of antimicrobial resistance.
- Identification of mechanisms (fitness factors, genetic elements, reservoirs) that enhance or decrease survival and transmission of AMR bacteria in pre- and post-harvest environments.
- Data to fill knowledge gaps in predicting risk associated with the occurrence of AMR bacteria in a given environment and the associated risks to human health outcomes.
- Assist federal partners (i.e., National Antimicrobial Resistance Monitoring System (NARMS) and USDA's National Animal Health Monitoring System (NAHMS)) through analysis of isolates and associated WGS data to identify critical elements that promote the development/persistence of AMR pathogens and that can be used to combat their impact.
- Development of alternatives to antibiotics including management practices, pre-and probiotics, bacteriophage gene products, lytic enzymes, vaccines and other novel products to reduce AMR in food producing animals, thus reducing the need for antibiotics.
- Elucidating the ecology of foodborne AMR bacteria in terms of gene transfer, the role of the host microbiome in the development and maintenance of AMR, and the role of biofilms in the development of AMR.

Anticipated Products

- Improved detection techniques facilitating the speed, ability, and accuracy of detecting foodborne AMR bacteria in food producing animals and their products.
- Data that fills knowledge gaps in understanding how AMR bacteria develop and spread through the agricultural continuum (production, processing and retail environments.)
- Identification of the most critically important AMR foodborne pathogens and management methods to reduce their occurrence.
- Improved strategies to reduce the need for antibiotics and the occurrence AMR bacteria in the food supply.

Potential Benefits/Impact

- Provides support for both stakeholders and regulatory agencies in developing strategies to address foodborne AMR bacteria.
- Provides data critical for assessing the risk of AMR in foodborne pathogens to human health outcomes.
- Provides data critical for identification and assessment of priority AMR pathogens and development of interventions.
- Improves strategies to reduce the need for antibiotics in production animals while maintaining their health and growth efficiency. This is critical for feeding an ever-growing population while also addressing a serious public and animal health concern.

NFSRP Resources/Locations

The following ARS locations have research projects addressing the 7 Problem Statements identified under Component 1

Pacific West Area: Albany, CA; Maricopa, AZ

Plains Area: Clay Center, NE; Fargo, ND; College Station, TX

Mid-West Area: West Lafayette, IN; Peoria, IL; Ames, IA

South East Area: Fayetteville, AR; Stoneville, MS; New Orleans, LA; Athens, GA; Raleigh, NC

North East Area: Beltsville, MD; Wyndmoor, PA

Selected Accomplishments:

Semicarbazide during poultry processing. To ensure food is safe from chemical contaminants, detection technologies should be accurate and reliable. Semicarbazide (SEM) is an indicator compound used by national and international organizations to infer the use of nitrofurazone, a banned antibiotic, in animal production. Recently the detection of SEM by a significant importer of U.S. poultry resulted in an import ban for products from specific processing plants. The validity of the use of SEM as an indicator for nitrofurazone has been questioned in recent years. Strong evidence has emerged that sanitizers used in processing facilities to decontaminate meat may chemically create SEM from biological molecules in the complete absence of nitrofurazone use. Studies conducted by ARS in Athens, Georgia, support this unintentional production of SEM on poultry meat. An extensive survey of poultry processing plants indicated that the use of certain antiseptic chemicals, in combination with pH, can react with meat tissue to produce detectable levels of SEM. These data confirm that incidental production of the chemical can occur in processing facilities; therefore, SEM is not a reliable indicator of nitrofurazone and alternative indicators of nitrofurazone use should be developed. This data has been transferred to food safety regulatory agencies, industry and trade organizations to assure and avoid inaccurate reporting of contamination, and to eliminate economic loss and potential trade issues. (NP108, C1, PS4, Project No. 6040-42000-043-000D)

Deep learning approach for classifying contamination levels. Mercury (Hg) and Arsenic (As) ions have been recognized as chemical threats to human health and can be present in food samples in trace amounts. A critical issue recognized by such agencies at the Food and Drug Administration is the difficulty in detection of low levels of contamination, in the parts per billion range. This remains challenging due to the small number of available data samples and significant intra-class variance. To overcome this challenge, ARS in collaboration with the Center for Food Safety Engineering, Purdue University, explored techniques for synthesizing realistic colorimetric images and propose a Convolutional Neural Network (CNN) classifier for five-contamination-levels. The system was trained and evaluated on a limited dataset of 126 images captured with a cell phone camera representing five contamination levels. The system yields 88.1% classification accuracy and 91.9% precision, demonstrating the feasibility of this approach. The application of this system would allow the use by regulators, processors and consumer of readily available cell phone cameras, to capture images that can estimate the level of contamination with heavy metals, thereby safe guarding even the most sensitive of foods. (NP108, C1, PS3, Project No. 8072-42000-077-000D)

Shelf life and season are drivers of Escherichia coli O157:H7 survival on cut lettuce. Escherichia coli O157:H7 infections from contaminated lettuce continue to impact public health and the U.S. lettuce industry, which is valued annually at nearly \$2 billion. Outbreaks linked to products grown in California occur predominantly from fall-harvested lettuce, and the reason for this seasonality is unknown. Using fresh-cut lettuce stored in modified atmosphere packaging in the cold, ARS at Albany, California, in collaboration with the Food and Drug Administration Center for Food Safety and Nutrition, identified the fall season and lettuce cultivars with poor shelf life as the main drivers of E. coli O157:H7 survival and microbiome structure. These results open new fields for inquiry into the seasonal aspects of the physiology of fresh-cut lettuce and its microbiome that may prevent the seasonal occurrence of E. coli

O157:H7 infections. Likewise, the identification of shelf life as an important lettuce trait in E. coli O157:H7 survival implies that researchers in both academia and industry are encouraged to further genetic breeding for improved lettuce shelf life must be an integral part of a successful strategy to enhance produce safety. (NP108, C1, PS1 Project No. 2030-42000-050-000D)

Enhancing foodborne pathogen sampling at processing facilities. Establishments producing raw ground beef products establish a baseline level of microorganisms as a method of process control verification. The sampling methods used are critically defined since if the microbiological sampling is not properly conducted it can give a false sense of security that the process is in control, when it is not. This is critical information for application at all scales of processing (including small- and mid-sized facilities). ARS at Clay Center, Nebraska, developed two new devices, continuous (CSD) and manual (MSD) meat sampling devices for raw beef trim. Protocols were developed, validated and recently commercialized to address commonly encountered implementation variation in commercial processing. The data showed that the various alternative applications of CSD and MSD-based trim sampling for pathogen detection were equivalent or better than previous methods and provide additional benefits in reduced labor and other costs, and improved worker safety. (NP108, C1, PS3, Project No. 3040-42000-019-000D)

Perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA) incorporation bioavailability. Perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA) was a chemical surfactant used for decades in many consumer products such as textiles and cooking pan coatings. As a result of its long-term use, PFOA is ubiquitous in the environment, animals and potentially to humans, but the understanding of PFOA transfer from soil to plants to animals is poor. Studies conducted by ARS in Fargo, North Dakota, determined the uptake of PFOA by alfalfa (as a model crop) from soil and the bioavailability of PFOA in rats (as an animal model) after consumption of PFOA residues incurred into alfalfa. PFOA uptake by alfalfa was fast and it accumulated mainly in the leaves. PFOA residues in alfalfa were readily absorbed by rats but were quickly excreted in urine. After a 2-day depuration period less than 0.5% of the dosed PFOA was measured in tissues such as the liver, blood, kidney, and skin. The study demonstrated that PFOA residues in alfalfa are quickly absorbed after consumption, but are also rapidly eliminated so that minimal tissue accumulation occurs. This rapid elimination is a critical observation, as these data will be used by Federal risk assessment agencies and policy makers regarding the possibility of PFOA contamination events, and their potential outcome. (NP108, C1, PS4, Project No. 3060-32420-001-000D)

In-package pulsed light treatment for increasing produce safety. Post-processing contamination with human pathogens such as Escherichia coli O157:H7 is a major contributing factor to foodborne illness outbreaks. Safe and effective methods are needed to minimize the spread of human pathogen contamination. ARS at Wyndmoor, Pennsylvania, developed an in-package high-intensity pulsed light treatment capable of penetrating plastic film and killing E. coli O157:H7 on the surface Romaine lettuce inside sealed packages. The treatment also reduced native microbial populations by greater than 90%, irrespective of the thickness of the plastic wrapping. Pulsed light treatment is an alternative green, chemical-free, nonthermal, post-packaging intervention treatment for leafy greens and other fresh and fresh-cut fruits and vegetables. (NP108, C1, PS3, Project No. 8072-41000-101-000D)

Detection of active Shiga toxin (Stx) in environmental waters. Shiga toxin-producing *Escherichia coli* (STEC) causes a wide spectrum of diseases, including hemorrhagic colitis and hemolytic uremic syndrome (HUS). Almost 5% of STEC infections result from waterborne exposures, due to fecal contamination, yet there is no test listed in the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) current Selected Analytical Methods for the detection of active Shiga toxins (Stx's) in water. ARS at Albany, California, developed a cell-based assay for the detection of metabolically active Stx's in environmental water. This assay is simple, affordable, and its performance is not affected by background flora and chlorine. The assay can detect active Stx's even when Stx-producing bacteria are less than 40 bacteria per 100 mL, which is well below the level of *E. coli* permitted for different types of waters (EPA, 2009). The multi-well format of the assay makes it ideal for high-throughput screening of water samples by national and international environmental public health surveillance programs to reduce human risk of infection with STEC. (NP108, C1, PS3, Project No. 2030-42000-049-000D)

Fumonisin producing fungi infecting corn kernels. Certain fungi such as *Fusarium* species are major concerns for food safety because they produce fumonisin mycotoxins. Fumonisins cause a number of species-specific animal diseases and may also cause neural tube birth defects, stunting, and esophageal cancer in humans. Critically, studies indicate fumonisin contamination of corn may result in upwards of \$200 million in losses annually to U.S. corn producers. Control of *Fusarium verticillioides*, the primary fungus producing fumonisins, and preventing the contamination of food and feed with fumonisins are difficult goals to achieve. Recently, ARS in Athens, Georgia, discovered a group of chemical compounds that inhibit the production of fumonisins by *F. verticillioides*. These compounds are the pyrrocidines, new types of antibiotics produced by another corn kernel inhabiting fungus, *Sarocladium zeae*. This fungus is unique, since upon infection, it does not cause any plant disease symptoms; does not produce any known mycotoxins, and is not toxic to animals and humans. The potential use of pyrrocidines as inhibitors of fumonisin production could have immense impact on the safety and value of corn and its processed products, for example infant foods, by reducing and managing fumonisin contamination. This would be a significant contribution to food and feed safety, and provide economic relief to corn growers and processors. (NP108, C1, PS5, Project No. 6040-42000-043-000D)

AflaSat: A database of global genetic diversity of *Aspergillus flavus*. Aflatoxins are carcinogenic fungal toxins produced by *Aspergillus* species, that cause serious animal and human health issues. Global populations of *Aspergillus flavus* are genetically diverse. Understanding distributions of aflatoxigenic and non-aflatoxigenic genotypes is important for developing effective aflatoxin control strategies for cereal crops such as corn. ARS in Maricopa, Arizona, utilized DNA-based markers to genotype nearly 29,000 isolates originating from 35 countries in North America, Central America, Africa, Europe, Asia, and Australia. Based upon these analyses, an online database called "AflaSat" was developed, and standardized genotype data for each isolate was uploaded and made accessible to our international collaborators. AflaSat will be made publicly available in Fall 2021, serving as a valuable resource for aflatoxin researchers, and food safety regulatory agencies worldwide, especially for identification of the non-aflatoxigenic genotypes that have potential as biocontrol strains. (NP108, C1, PS6, Project No. 2020-42000-022-000D)

Inactivation of foodborne pathogens within plant burgers. Plant-based burgers have become increasingly popular and more readily available, yet little is known about the food safety of such products. ARS at Wyndmoor, Pennsylvania, conducted studies to compare and quantify inactivation of Shiga toxin-producing *Escherichia coli* (STEC) and *Listeria monocytogenes* (Lm) two known bacterial pathogens often found in ground beef burgers. Plant and beef formed burgers (4 ounces) contaminated with the bacteria were subjected to either high pressure (HPP: 350 or 600 MPa) or cooked in a sauté pan at 62.8, 68.3, or 73.9°C. Levels of both pathogens were significantly reduced by these interventions and both responded similarly to heat and pressure in either plant or animal derived product. Since cooking by heat and HPP parameters required to eliminate STEC or Lm from ground beef are well established by regulation, these parameters are also effective for controlling cells of these same pathogens in burgers made from a plant-sourced protein. (NP108, C1, PS5, Project No. 8072-41420-019-000D)

Integrated Pathogen Modeling Platform. The Integrated Pathogen Modeling Platform (IPMP) is a software tool developed by ARS for data analysis, model development in predictive microbiology, and for microbial food safety management. ARS developed the new online predictive modeling tool using open-source technologies, integrating data analysis, model development, and predictive modeling into one simple online Platform for food safety decision-making and supply chain management. This Platform is designed with user-friendly graphical interfaces to allow the users to easily navigate through the computational process without the need-to-know computer programming and modeling. It will enable the food industries, regulatory food safety agencies, and academic researchers nationally and internationally to predict the growth and survival of a wide range of foodborne pathogens, such as *Clostridium perfringens*, *Clostridium botulinum*, *Listeria monocytogenes*, pathogenic *Escherichia coli* (*E. coli* O157:H7), *Salmonella* spp., *Staphylococcus aureus*, and *Bacillus cereus*, in raw and processed foods throughout the supply chain. Implementation and use of the Platform will significantly improve food safety quality assurance and enhance the microbial safety of the global food supply. (NP108, C1, PS5, Project No. 8072-42000-083-000D)

Detection of highly pathogenic Salmonella in food processing. *Salmonella* is a foodborne pathogen prevalent in animals, and salmonellosis foodborne illness in humans is generally contracted through the consumption of contaminated food from an animal origin. Current technology detects all *Salmonella* strains in food products without consideration for pathogenicity. However, some *Salmonella* strains are highly pathogenic and more likely to cause human illness. ARS at Clay Center, Nebraska, developed a novel assay for the detection of highly pathogenic *Salmonella* strains in food products. In collaboration with a commercial partner, the assay is being developed into a rapid test kit for use in the food processing industry. This assay will enable food processing industries to clearly identify and proactively remove food products that are contaminated with highly pathogenic *Salmonella* strains, greatly improving food safety and public health, while reducing product condemnation. (NP108, C1, PS3, Project No. 3040-42000-019-000D)

Biofilms in processing facilities help pathogens survive sanitation. *Escherichia coli* O157:H7 is a foodborne pathogen that causes outbreaks of severe disease in humans. Floor drains at meat processing plants harbor diverse bacteria as a protected community in the form of a biofilm. ARS in Clay Center, Nebraska, tested biofilm samples from floor drains at two meat plants with different *E. coli* O157:H7

contamination histories. They found that certain bacteria in the drain biofilms helped E. coli O157:H7 survive and persist by protecting it from sanitation protocols. To reduce contamination, small-, mid- and large-scale meat processors have been made aware of need to identify and have access to plant sanitation procedures that disrupt biofilms, making E. coli O157:H7 and other potentially harmful bacteria more susceptible to sanitation and disinfection procedures. (NP108, C1, PS1, Project No. 3040-42000-018-000D)

A new tool to identify antibiotic, acid, biocide, metal, and stress resistance genes in pathogens.

Antimicrobial resistant (AMR) bacteria are a major health issue causing 2.8 million infections and greater than 35,000 deaths each year in the U.S. A multi-agency team including National Center for Biological Information, Food and Drug Administration, USDA-Food Safety Inspection Service and ARS in Athens, Georgia, developed the Bacterial Antimicrobial Resistance Reference Gene Database and the AMRFinderPlus gene detection tool. The database includes 7,737 antibiotic, acid, biocide, metal, and stress resistance genes which can be detected by AMRFinderPlus in whole genome sequences of any bacteria. The new tool allows users to utilize only antimicrobial resistance genes or to include stress response and virulence genes. This tool increases the number and kind of genes that can be targeted to better understand AMR in important human pathogen thereby improving food safety and public health. (NP108, C1, PS7, Project No. 6040-32000-009-000D)