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Meat processors push for better traceability in China

By Dominique Patton

27/07/2006 - Systems that trace meat from the farm to dinner tables are seeing strong interest in China as the meat processing sector grows and consumers become more concerned by food safety.

Thorsys, an Australian company specialising in IT traceability systems for the food industry, says the larger Chinese meat processors are keen to step up traceability in their production chain, and they are also backed by the growing number of supermarkets in the country.

The company, promoting its services at the China International Meat Industry exhibition in Beijing yesterday, says it is hoping to set up a trial project to convince the government to support the industry-wide push to traceability requirements.

Such a move would be a significant overhaul of the current systems, which often go no further than hand-written cattle tags and paper records.

"The Olympics is helping the push towards traceability," said Kent Matla, China representative for the firm. "With bird flu, and other animal diseases on the rise around the world, food safety has become an increasing concern for the government."

Chinese meat production has grown rapidly in recent years driven by consumers with rising incomes. It now accounts for 71 per cent of the total meat production in Asia, although 80 per cent of the industry is still controlled by the smaller producers supplying wet markets and traditional outlets.

However this is expected to change, as urbanization continues, and more and more consumers shop in supermarkets rather than markets.

Dr Zhou Guangzhong, professor and vice president of Nanjing Agricultural University and chairman of the Chinese Society of Animal Products Processing, told the World Meat Congress in Brisbane this year that he expects large and medium meat processors to have 70 per cent of the market by 2020.

These processors, such as Shineway and the Yurun group, often control the whole line, owning their own animals, the abattoirs and the processing business. This would make traceability systems relatively easy to install and explains the significant interest so far.

Thorsys develops software that uses barcodes to track the life of a cow through to the processing stage and its delivery to the consumer.

"Everyone needs it and everyone wants it. But some companies might wait for the government to take a decision while others want to say they have it already, as a competitive edge," Matla told AP-Foodtechnology.com.

China is also keen to export high quality beef overseas but it will need to improve traceability to meet stringent requirements in export markets.

Thorsys wants to set up a test project with one company as a kind of showcase for the rest of the industry, as well as the government.

"I believe we can identify a trial project before the end of the year," said Matla.

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