

Keeping Foods Bird-Free

By R.W. Delaney, Business Writer

Bird BLazer

Of all the pest control problems facing the food and beverage industry, birds are probably the most common. Birds, says Richard Kammerling, owner and president of R.K. Chemical Systems, Inc., are naturally attracted to food and moisture, so they routinely try to infiltrate food facilities of all types. Birds like to perch outdoors, awaiting their opportunity for entry, says Kammerling, whose New York-based company has been delivering pest management consultation and supplies to the food industry nationally for more than 20 years.

“The most common offenders,” Kammerling says, “are pigeons, sparrows, and starlings. They are either trying to roost on the outside of facilities -- where droppings can form and degrade food service areas such as loading docks -- or they’re flying in and out to find places to roost, nest, or forage for food.”

Particularly vulnerable, he says, are places where garbage is removed or placed in a dumpster. “You can almost time the bird activity, based on garbage disposal,” he says.

Mounting Evil

When a bird is near your food, it can be a major health issue. “Any evidence of adulteration or filth is not tolerated by government regulators,” Kammerling says, “and that includes bird droppings, feathers, or nesting materials in food-processing plants, warehouses, or any other food establishment.”

It’s not just low tolerance; it’s NO TOLERANCE, he underscores. All objectionable bird activities must be prohibited in the area to prevent contamination.

Undoubtedly, bird control is a critical issue in the food industry, but solutions can be simpler than some people realize, so part of Kammerling’s job is to educate both the sellers of pest control products and the users in the food industry.

“Cleanliness outside the facility is one key,” Kammerling says. “The less birds have to eat, the less attractive the site becomes to them.” So he counsels food facility managers to take active measures to prevent food spills and access to garbage. And there are other effective measures to deter birds.

Mounting an Offensive Against Birds

“One of the primary methods of controlling bird pests in an outside area is to erect a physical barrier,” Kammerling continues. By nature, birds are inclined to hop on platforms, find ledges, overhangs, and niches to settle on, and squeeze through structural cavities in search of fly-in space. A physical barrier disrupts this normal pattern of bird behavior, Kammerling says. If the bird is made uncomfortable enough, you can change its pattern.

What works for Kammerling’s customers and clients are Spikes® Needle Strips. These branched, plastic protrusions, which are manufactured by Bird-X, Inc. of Chicago, are typically installed on ledges, roofs, architectural outcroppings, and other favorite bird “settling sites.” The densely branched and spaced Spikes prevent birds from roosting and also from squeezing between the spiky extensions.

“It is the #1 method adopted by most places to deter birds outside food facilities,” Kammerling reports. “A physical barrier won’t necessarily prevent birds from getting in, but it changes the pattern of behavior. The birds may alight on a fence or other object instead. If you’ve moved them 100 feet away, that may be enough to inhibit them and prevent droppings in vulnerable areas,” he explains.

Assessing Vulnerability

FDA rules and various state regulations governing food facilities are rigorous, Kammerling says. He points out that FDA regulations are worded very strongly, including any food that is “packaged, processed or held under unsanitary conditions

where it may cause a problem or become adulterated.” That little word “may” leaves the door wide open to regulatory violations that can be cited by agents or inspectors.

“Birds are highly visible,” Kammerling notes. “You can’t hide birds.” You must deal with them aggressively to deter them.

Some people, he says, try to discourage birds with sonic devices or “scare tactics” such as balloons, fake owls, and holograms. “But these are only temporary controls. Birds get accustomed to them, whereas physical barriers continue to prohibit nesting and perching,” Kammerling states.

Others have used poison. But poison in today’s society, he says, is not acceptable in terms of environmental concerns and safety issues. In his view, poison is the method of “last resort.”

Kammerling and his company assess vulnerable areas by inspection. Supermarkets and bakeries, for example, are attractive to birds at the back door receiving area, especially if the receiving area includes overhangs and ledges that provide weather protection for the birds plus an occasional opportunity for flying in to filch food. Birds are totally objectionable around supermarkets because customers coming in and out see the birds and the droppings in full view. And so do state and federal regulators.

The bird problem is magnified in food storage warehouses and huge processing plants, Kammerling explains, due to the occurrence of even more doors, ledges, windows, and delivery vehicles coming and going through open doors.

Impressions Count

“Inspectors judge on general appearance,” Kammerling says. If birds are visible nearby, their mere presence can trigger a closer inspection. “Further, bird droppings can be a health hazard, harboring disease and parasites that are harmful to humans.”

The goal of Spikes and other barriers is to prevent the problem from showing up in the first place. Spikes, which are sold in convenient 12-inch strips (sections), can be easily attached to surfaces with a caulking compound or other adherent. “On wider ledges, we urge customers to use two rows of Spikes for full coverage,” Kammerling adds.

“When a food processing plant used 400 feet of Spikes to surround its facility, the Spikes moved the birds away and kept them away. While there’s no single answer to bird control, a physical barrier is the ultimate requirement to keep birds away,” Kammerling observes.” And it saves on cleanup costs.

“Spikes are relatively inexpensive, and they are a one-time expense,” he says. “You cannot put a price on being cited for a critical regulatory violation. In the worst case, a facility could lose its license to operate. Nobody wants that kind of hassle,” Kammerling concludes. Or to put it another way: An ounce of prevention is considerably less expensive than the cost a major violation.

For more information, head over to www.bird-x.com.

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