

Publication: Idaho Statesman; Date: Feb 19, 2013; Section: Business Insider; Page: X8

FOOD PROCESSING

Idaho's food safety king

Jeff Kronenberg helps food processors stay profitable — and out of the headlines.

BY LENNON S. REID SPECIAL TO BUSINESS INSIDER © 2013 Idaho Statesman

Idaho food and dairy processors have largely been spared the customer malaise, corporate financial ruin and bad publicity that come with tainted products. Jeff Kronenberg and his associates aim to keep it that way.

"I've been involved with (out-of-state) companies that have had FDA regulatory actions against them," says Kronenberg, a food safety and processing consultant for 30 years. "I've been involved with tampering incidents. I've been an expert witness. I've been subpoenaed by the FBI. I work mainly on preventing those things from happening in Idaho." Kronenberg has grown food for himself and has been involved with community gardens and food co-ops. He graduated from Western Washington University in Bellingham with a bachelor's degree in microbiology and received a master's degree in food science from Cornell University.

He works under a program jointly administered and funded by the University of Idaho School of Food Science, U of I Extension, and TechHelp Idaho, itself a partnership of Boise State University, the U of I and Idaho State University. His services are brokered through TechHelp, a problem-solving service for manufacturers.

"We do have food safety issues from time to time in Idaho," Kronenberg says, "but fortunately, most of them are caught before we actually have any problems."

ADVICE ON BUSINESS PRACTICES

While food safety makes up three-fourths of his work, he also advises food-processing businesses how to operate more effectively, make better products and boost profits. He leads seminars, workshops and webinars. Most of his clients are medium-size and large businesses. A closely related group based in Caldwell works with entrepreneurs who are developing new products or struggling to enter the marketplace.

"On a regular basis, I am out visiting companies," Kronenberg says. "I have probably been into 98 to 99 percent of processor establishments in the state. We do every single component dealing with food and dairy manufacturing. About the only thing we've never done is build a plant for a company."

Kronenberg doesn't provide food safety inspections, though he advises clients how to prepare for them.

SAVING MONEY AND CREATING JOBS

According to the U of I Extension, Kronenberg has helped nearly a quarter of Idaho's 192 food-manufacturing businesses boost profits and jobs. Since 2005, the extension service says, Kronenberg has worked with about 50 companies, saving them \$108 million and helping to create 433 jobs.

TRYING NOT TO COMPETE WITH PRIVATE CONSULTANTS

Many clients approach the U of I Extension with food processing or industrial problems. Clients have included J.R. Simplot Co., Bigelow Tea in Boise and Sand-point-based Lighthouse Foods.

Often, Kronenberg will visit a site, prepare an assessment and draft a proposal for his services. He won't say how much he charges, though he says he tries to charge fees typical of the private sector. Steve Hatten, TechHelp Idaho's executive director, says TechHelp typically charges \$125 an hour, though fees vary. Hatten says Kronenberg and his colleagues brought in \$178,000 last year from food and dairy processors.

Kronenberg is sensitive to perceptions that he might be competing with private sector consultants.

"We are very cautious because we are not trying to create competition with private industry," Kronenberg says. "It's a fine line. But in the end, half the time I end up hiring my competitors. We've been forming more and more collaborations with experts all across Idaho. We have lots of third parties we bring in. We've had no complaints. We kind of steer away from areas where there is a heavy concentration of consulting groups in Idaho. We're not there to undercut any consulting agency out there or to take away business from them."

A RECENT RECALL

In January, Boise food processor B and D Foods voluntarily recalled a batch of frozen cooked meat products produced in early December, some of which contained bacteria. The products had been sold to distributors and food manufacturers in several states. B and D says none of the tainted food ended up in grocery stores or in the hands of consumers. The recall was the first in the company's history.

"That's the main point to bring out," says Kronenberg, who was not involved in the recall but has consulted for B and D. "I work with lots of companies across Ida-ho, and I was pleased to see that, although it was unfortunate to see that there was a recall, there were no injuries, illnesses or deaths associated with it."

TRAINING FOR LITEHOUSE FOODS' STAFF

Kronenberg has helped Lite-house Foods in Sandpoint satisfy ever-increasing demands from nationwide retail and wholesale customers that food products meet standard industry health and safety protocols. Litehouse produces 85 varieties of salad dressings, cheese and other products. The company reported \$170 million in sales last year.

Dairy operations manager Louis Armstrong says Kronen-berg has been hired several times to provide consulting and training. Armstrong says Lite-house sometimes has chosen Kronenberg and TechHelp "because we could bring Kronen-berg on site quickly and get the training done here."

Litehouse brought Kronenberg to its Sandpoint dairy plant for a week last August to help the company prepare for third-party audits, provide training and develop a food-safety control program known in food processing as hazard analysis and critical control points, or HACCP.

"Our key success is that we passed the audit, which is huge for us," Armstrong says. "It will allow us to take on some bigger customers for retail sales."

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Photos by CHRIS BUTLER / cbutler@idahostatesman.com Consultant Jeff Kronenberg, left, advises Dave Wagers, president of Idaho Candy Co., on health regulation issues. Kronenberg has worked with Idaho Candy for about five years.

A CASE STUDY

Here's an example of Kronenberg's work cited by the University of Idaho:

Client: Pacific Northwest Farmers Cooperative in Genesee (Latah County).

Business problems: Build business opportunities for cooperative members. Meet the rising opportunity to market garbanzo beans used in making hummus. Meet food-processing certification standards and client requirements for garbanzo beans.

Results: Kronenberg and TechHelp helped the cooperative achieve an "excellent" rating on an industry-standard food-safety audit, create or retain 16 jobs, secure new customers, enter new markets, increase sales, reduce certain costs and make capital investments.

Comment: "He (Kronenberg) saved us money, and he made us money," said PNW Farmers Cooperative CEO Bill Newbry.



Kronenberg, left, listens as Wagers talks about one of the candy lines at Idaho Candy's plant at 412 S. 8th St. in Boise.