

**IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE WESTERN DISTRICT OF TEXAS
WACO DIVISION**

**INSTITUTE FOR ENVIRONMENTAL
HEALTH, INC.**

Plaintiff

v.

FOOD SAFETY NET SERVICES, LTD.

Defendant.

Civil Case No. 6:21-cv-176

JURY TRIAL DEMANDED

COMPLAINT FOR PATENT INFRINGEMENT

Plaintiff Institute for Environmental Health, Inc. (“Plaintiff” or “IEH”) hereby asserts the following claims for patent infringement against Food Safety Net Services, Ltd. (“Defendant” or “FSNS”) and alleges, upon information and belief, as follows:

PARTIES

1. Plaintiff IEH is a Washington corporation with its principal place of business located in Lake Forest Park, Washington.
2. On information and belief, Defendant FSNS is a Texas corporation with its principal place of business located in San Antonio, Texas.

JURISDICTION AND VENUE

3. This claim is for patent infringement arising under the patent laws of the United States, 35 U.S.C. § 1 *et seq.*
4. This Court has original jurisdiction over IEH’s claims pursuant to 28 U.S.C. §§ 1331 and 1338(a).
5. Venue is proper in this Court pursuant to 28 U.S.C. §§ 1391 and 1400(b).

ASSERTED PATENTS

6. IEH is the owner by assignment of all right, title, and interest in U.S. Patent No. 7,534,584 (the “’584 patent”) entitled “Modular Compositing—Multiple Lot Screening Protocols for Detection of Pathogens, Microbial Contaminants and/or Constituents.” The U.S. Patent and Trademark Office (“USPTO”) duly and legally issued the ’584 patent on May 19, 2009. The USPTO issued a reexamination certificate for the ’584 patent on March 6, 2019. A copy of the ’584 patent is attached as Exhibit A to the Complaint. A copy of an inter partes reexamination certificate for the ’584 patent, issued March 6, 2019, is attached as Exhibit B to the Complaint.

7. IEH is the owner by assignment of all right, title, and interest in U.S. Patent No. 8,822,143 (the “’143 patent”) entitled “Modular Compositing—Multiple Lot Screening Protocols for Detection of Pathogens, Microbial Contaminants and/or Constituents.” The U.S. Patent and Trademark Office (“USPTO”) duly and legally issued the ’143 patent on September 2, 2014. A copy of the ’143 patent is attached as Exhibit C to the Complaint. A copy of a certificate of correction for the ’143 patent, dated September 2, 2014, is attached as Exhibit D to the Complaint.

8. IEH is the owner by assignment of all right, title, and interest in U.S. Patent No. 9,637,771 (the “’771 patent”) entitled “Modular Compositing—Multiple Lot Screening Protocols for Detection of Pathogens, Microbial Contaminants and/or Constituents.” The USPTO duly and legally issued the ’771 patent on May 2, 2017. A copy of the ’771 patent is attached as Exhibit E to the Complaint.

THE INVENTIONS OF THE PATENTS-IN-SUIT

9. IEH provides the food industry with testing for microbiological contamination before releasing food into commerce. Producers, manufacturers, and regulators strive to improve the safety and quality of the food, ensuring that it is free of harmful microbiological

contamination, such as E. coli, Listeria, and Salmonella. See '143 Patent Col. 1:49-50; '771 Patent Col. 1:56-57; '584 Patent Col. 1:37-38.

10. In or around 2002, an IEH scientist invented a new method of testing for contamination that has since revolutionized the food industry, and subsequently patented that method in the '584 Patent, the '143 Patent and '771 Patent, and assigned each of them to IEH.

11. The patented method may be used to simultaneously test multiple lots of food for contamination. For example, in the context of meat products, a "lot" of harvested beef trim may consist of a combo-bin containing e.g., 2,000 lbs. of beef trim. For example, the patented method can be used to test five such lots simultaneously.

12. The patented method begins by "separately collecting multiple independent samples" from each lot. '584 Patent Claim 1(a); '143 Patent Claim 1(a); '771 Patent Claim 1(a). In the beef example, this collections step may involve gathering e.g., sixty (60) independent samples (portions/pieces) of beef trim.

13. Those samples are combined together to form a composite sample representative of the first lot. '584 Patent Claim 1(b); '143 Patent Claim 1(b); '771 Patent Claim 1(b). That composited sample is then added to an enrichment medium, often a liquid broth containing nutrients allowing the target microbe (e.g., E. coli) to grow. '584 Patent Claim 1(c); '143 Patent Claim 1(c); '771 Patent Claim 1(c). This enriched composite may be more easily tested for contamination.

14. This process is performed for each of the lots to create multiple enriched composites, one for each lot.

15. Next, the patented method combines a portion from each enriched composite to create a single pooled sample representing all five lots. '584 Patent Claim 1(d); '143 Patent Claim 1(d); '771 Patent Claim 1(d).

16. Finally, the pooled sample is tested to determine whether it contains the target microbe, such as *E. coli* in the beef example. '584 Patent Claim 1(e); '143 Patent Claim 1(e); '771 Patent Claim 1(e).

17. The Asserted Patents teach that, if just one of the lots is contaminated, testing the pooled sample would detect that contamination. *Id.* Thus, if the testing assay does not detect the microbe, **all five lots** are considered free of *E. coli*. *Id.* The Asserted Patents refer to this step as “validating” the test lots. *Id.* This allows five lots to be analyzed and validated using a single test.

18. But if the test detects contamination in the pooled sample, not all five lots of beef necessarily have the microbe and need to be destroyed. *Id.* Instead, the remaining portions of the five enriched composites are separately tested to pinpoint the contamination. *Id.*

19. The inventor of the subject patents discovered that, in most instances, the contamination is restricted to only one or two of the five lots. Thus, the invention results in substantial net savings for food producers because less product is destroyed (or otherwise diverted), while simultaneously maintaining the safety of the food chain.

20. The '584, '143 and '771 patents cover this form of testing.

21. Claim 1 of the '143 patent provides a representative example of how those patents describe the inventive method:

1. A method of sampling and testing products for microbes in multiple separate lots, comprising:

a) separately collecting multiple independent samples from each of multiple separate lots, wherein each separate lot is separately sampled by taking said multiple independent samples thereof;

b) separately compositing the collected multiple independent samples from each of the separate lots to provide a corresponding set of separate composited lot samples, wherein each of the separate composited lot samples is attributed to a particular corresponding separate lot;

- c) enriching each of the separate composited test lot samples to provide a set of separate composited test lot samples enriched for the target microbe(s);
- d) removing portions of each separate enriched composited lot sample, and combining the removed portions to provide a pooled modular composite sample; and
- e) testing of the pooled modular composite sample, using a suitable detection assay, for the target microbe(s), wherein when such testing is negative all of said samples that were composited to form the separate composited lot samples are deemed negative for the target microbe(s) and each of the multiple separate lots is validated, and wherein when such testing is positive, each of the individual separate composited lot samples that were used to form the pooled modular composite sample are individually tested to determine which of the separate composited lot samples is positive for the target microbe(s), wherein the lots corresponding to any negatively testing composited lot samples are validated.

IEH'S ATTEMPTS TO LICENSE ITS PATENTS TO FSNS

22. IEH has made repeated efforts to license the subject patents to FSNS. As early as 2017, IEH notified FSNS of its infringement of the subject patents. In November 2017, IEH provided John Bellinger of FSNS with licensing rates for testing performed with the inventions of the subject patents. FSNS did not agree to a license.

23. In November 2020, IEH again contacted John Bellinger of FSNS, and asked if FSNS was “interested in resuming our discussions regarding a potential license agreement.” IEH again sent Mr. Bellinger licensing rates for testing performed with the inventions of the subject patents. FSNS never responded to IEH’s licensing inquiries.

FSNS’ INFRINGEMENT

24. FSNS is in the business of, among other things, conducting laboratory testing of agricultural products, crops, equipment, and environmental samples for the presence of microorganisms.

25. On information and belief, among other things, FSNS performs microbiological testing using methods of sampling and testing for microbes in separate lots, including the use of selectively enriched sample “pooling” for microbes (the “FSNS Pooling Methods”).

26. On information and belief, the FSNS Pooling Methods begin by collecting samples from separate lots, such as lots of meat (e.g., beef). FSNS takes multiple independent samples from each of the separate lots. For example, when testing five lots of beef, FSNS takes multiple independent samples (portions/pieces) of beef trim from each of the five lots. On information and belief, FSNS either conducts this step itself or conditions the benefit of pooled testing on its customer(s) performing this sampling step. In the latter scenario, FSNS establishes the manner and timing of the sampling.

27. On information and belief, FSNS separately composites each of the samples from each of the separate lots. For example, again with respect to testing beef, FSNS takes e.g, 60 independent samples (pieces/portions) of beef trim from each of the five lots and separately adds them into five bags. Each bag contains samples drawn from a particular lot beef. On information and belief, FSNS either conducts this step itself or conditions the benefit of pooled testing on its customer(s) performing this compositing step. In the latter scenario, FSNS establishes the manner and timing of the compositing.

28. On information and belief, FSNS separately enriches each of the composite samples. For example, FSNS uses a wet enrichment and separately incubates each of the composite samples for 12 to 24 hours at a temperature between 40 and 45 degrees Celsius.

29. On information and belief, FSNS then removes a portion from each enriched sample and combines those portions together into a pooled composite sample. For example, after incubation, FSNS takes 1 to 2 mL from the five enriched composite samples and combines them into a single pooled sample that is homogenized.

30. On information and belief, FSNS tests the pooled sample using various detection assays. For example, FSNS may use the Atlas STEC EG2 Combo and Salmonella SG2 detection

assays for the analysis and detection of *E. coli* and *Salmonella enterica*. When the tests of the pooled sample return a negative result, FSNS deems all of the sampled lots negative. But when the test of the pooled sample returns a positive result, FSNS uses a detection assay to test each of the separately enriched composite samples. FSNS then separately validates those samples. When any of the individual tests returns a negative result, FSNS deems negative the sampled lots corresponding to those individually enriched samples with a negative result. Conversely, when any of the individual tests returns a positive result, FSNS deems positive the sampled lots corresponding to those individual enriched samples with a positive result.

31. On information and belief, FSNS has and continues to infringe, literally or under the doctrine of equivalents, at least one claim of the '584, '143 and '771 patents, including claim 1 of each patent, by using the FSNS Pooling Methods.

32. On information and belief, FSNS is, and has been, on notice of the '584, '143 and '771 patents since at least as early as October 18, 2017, when IEH sent a letter to FSNS, alerting FSNS to the existence and its infringement of subject patents. This letter was a follow-up to an in-person meeting between IEH and FSNS principals discussing FSNS's infringement of the subject patents.

33. On information and belief, FSNS has continued to infringe the '584, '143 and '771 patents despite an objectively high likelihood that its actions constitute infringement of these valid patents. FSNS's infringement of the '584, '143 and '771 patents has therefore been willful.

34. On information and belief, FSNS's infringing conduct was and is without authority, consent, or license.

35. IEH has suffered irreparable harm and will continue to suffer irreparable harm unless FSNS is enjoined from infringing the '584, '143 and '771 patents. IEH has no adequate remedy at law.

36. IEH is entitled to recover from FSNS the damages sustained by IEH as a result of FSNS's wrongful acts in an amount IEH will prove at trial, including, but not limited to, lost profits and/or a reasonable royalty, together with interest and costs, as well as attorneys' fees, should the Court deem the case to be exceptional.

COUNT I: INFRINGEMENT OF THE '143 PATENT

37. IEH repeats and re-alleges the allegations contained in the preceding paragraphs as if fully set forth herein.

38. Defendant has and continues to infringe, literally and/or under the doctrine of equivalents, at least one claim of the '143 patent, including claim 1, by using the FSNS Pooling Methods.

39. FSNS's use of the FSNS Pooling Methods includes separately collecting multiple independent samples from each of multiple separate test lots, wherein each separate test lot is separately sampled by taking said multiple independent samples thereof. FSNS either conducts this sampling step itself or conditions the benefit of pooled testing on its customer(s) performing this sampling step. In the latter scenario, FSNS establishes the manner and timing of the sampling.

40. FSNS's use of the FSNS Pooling Methods also includes separately compositing the collected multiple independent samples from each of the separate test lots to provide a corresponding set of separate composited test lot samples, wherein each of the separate composited test lot samples is attributed to a particular corresponding separate test lot. FSNS either conducts this compositing step itself or conditions the benefit of pooled testing on its customer(s) performing this compositing step. In the latter scenario, FSNS establishes the manner and timing of the compositing.

41. FSNS's use of the FSNS Pooling Methods further includes enriching each of the separate composited test lot samples enriched for the target microbe.

42. FSNS's use of the FSNS Pooling Methods includes removing portions of each separate enriched composited test lot sample, and combining the removed portions to provide a pooled modular composite sample.

43. FSNS's use of the FSNS Pooling Methods still further includes testing of the pooled modular composite sample, using a suitable detection assay, for the target microbe, wherein when such testing is negative all of said samples that were composited to form the separate composited test lot samples are deemed negative for the target microbe and each of the multiple separate test lots is validated, and wherein when such testing is positive, each of the individual separate composited test lot samples that were used to form the pooled modular composite sample are individually tested to determine which of the separate composited test lot samples is positive for the target microbe, wherein the test lots corresponding to any negatively testing composited test lot samples are validated.

44. FSNS's infringing conduct was and is without authority, consent, or license.

45. FSNS is, and has been, on notice of the '143 patent since at least as early as October 18, 2017.

46. Upon information and belief, FSNS's infringement of the '143 patent has been willful.

47. IEH has suffered irreparable harm and will continue to suffer irreparable harm unless FSNS is enjoined from infringing the '143 patent.

48. IEH has been damaged and continues to be damaged by FSNS's infringement of the '143 patent.

COUNT II: INFRINGEMENT OF THE '771 PATENT

49. IEH repeats and re-alleges the allegations contained in the preceding paragraphs as if fully set forth herein.

50. FSNS has and continues to infringe, literally or under the doctrine of equivalents, at least one claim of the '771 patent, including claim 1, by using the FSNS Pooling Methods.

51. FSNS's use of the FSNS Pooling Methods includes separately collecting multiple independent samples from each of multiple separate lots, wherein each separate lot is separately sampled by taking said multiple independent samples thereof. FSNS either conducts this sampling step itself or conditions the benefit of pooled testing on its customer(s) performing this sampling step. In the latter scenario, FSNS establishes the manner and timing of the sampling.

52. FSNS's use of the FSNS Pooling Methods also includes separately compositing the collected multiple independent samples from each of the separate lots to provide a corresponding set of separate composited lot samples, wherein each of the separate composited lot samples is attributed to a particular corresponding separate lot. FSNS either conducts this compositing step itself or conditions the benefit of pooled testing on its customer(s) performing this compositing step. In the latter scenario, FSNS establishes the manner and timing of the compositing.

53. FSNS's use of the FSNS Pooling Methods further includes enriching each of the separate composited lot samples to provide a set of separate composited lot samples enriched for the target microbe.

54. FSNS's use of the FSNS Pooling Methods includes moving portions of each separate enriched composited lot sample, and combining the removed portions to provide a pooled modular composite sample.

55. FSNS's use of the FSNS Pooling Methods still further includes testing of the pooled modular composite sample, using a suitable detection assay, for the target microbe, wherein when such testing is negative all of said samples that were composited to form the separate composited lot samples are deemed negative for the target microbe and each of the multiple separate lots is validated, and wherein when such testing is positive, each of the individual separate composited lot samples that were used to form the pooled modular composite sample are individually tested to determine which of the separate composited lot samples is

positive for the target microbe, wherein the lots corresponding to any negatively testing composited lot samples are validated.

56. FSNS's infringing conduct was and is without authority, consent, or license.

57. FSNS is, and has been, on notice of the '771 patent since at least as early as October 18, 2017.

58. Upon information and belief, FSNS's infringement of the '771 patent has been willful.

59. IEH has suffered irreparable harm and will continue to suffer irreparable harm unless FSNS is enjoined from infringement of the '771 patent.

60. IEH has been damaged and continues to be damaged by FSNS's infringement of the '771 patent.

COUNT III: INFRINGEMENT OF THE '584 PATENT

61. IEH repeats and re-alleges the allegations contained in the preceding paragraphs as if fully set forth herein.

62. Defendants has and continues to infringe, literally and/or under the doctrine of equivalents, at least one claim of the '584 patent, including claim 1, by using the FSNS Pooling Methods.

63. FSNS's use of the FSNS Pooling Methods includes collecting a plurality of portions from each of a plurality of separate operationally-linked test lots of beef, each to be validated for release into commerce, the test lots each comprising an assemblage of one or more specimens from which the portions are collected, wherein each test lot is separately sampled to conform to a statistical-based sampling plan specifying, for a particular microbial agent or organism, a number of portions to be taken sufficient to provide for validation and release of the test lot into commerce. FSNS either conducts this collecting step itself or conditions the benefit of pooled testing on its customer(s) performing this collecting step. In the latter scenario, FSNS establishes the manner and timing of the collecting.

64. FSNS's use of the FSNS Pooling Methods also includes combining the collected conforming plurality of portions corresponding to each of the separate test lots to provide a corresponding set of separate test lot samples, wherein each separate test lot sample is attributed to a particular corresponding separate test lot. FSNS either conducts this combining step itself or conditions the benefit of pooled testing on its customer(s) performing this combining step. In the latter scenario, FSNS establishes the manner and timing of the combining.

65. FSNS's use of the FSNS Pooling Methods further includes incubating the set of separate test lot samples under conditions suitable to allow levels of a target microbial agent or organism that is present in one or more of the separate test lot samples to reach detectable levels and become uniform, or substantially uniform, throughout the respective one or more separate test lot samples, to provide a set of separate test lot samples enriched for the target microbial agent or organism.

66. FSNS's use of the FSNS Pooling Methods further includes removing portions of each enriched separate test lot sample, and combining the removed portions to provide a modular composite sample.

67. FSNS's use of the FSNS Pooling Methods still further includes testing of the modular composite sample, using a suitable detection assay, for the target microbial agent or organism, wherein when such testing is negative all of said separate test lots are validated for release into commerce, and wherein when such testing is positive, each of the individual separate test lots are validated for release into commerce, according to the statistical-based sampling plan, by further testing of a portion of the respective enriched separate test lot sample using the same or a more sensitive protocol and obtaining a negative test result for each test lot, wherein the enrichment described above, prior to removing portions as described above, is sufficient to enable said validation of individual separate test lots with no requirement for further enrichment thereof, and with no requirement for further sampling, as described above.

68. FSNS's infringing conduct was and is without authority, consent, or license.

69. FSNS is, and has been, on notice of the '584 patent since at least as early as October 18, 2017.

70. Upon information and belief, FSNS's infringement of the '584 patent has been willful.

71. IEH has suffered irreparable harm and will continue to suffer irreparable harm unless FSNS is enjoined from infringing the '584 patent.

72. IEH has been damaged and continues to be damaged by FSNS's infringement of the '584 patent.

REQUEST FOR RELIEF

A. IEH respectfully requests that the Court enter judgment:

B. Declaring that FSNS has infringed U.S. Patent Nos. 7,534,584, 8,822,143, and 9,637,771;

C. Declaring that FSNS's infringement has been willful;

D. Awarding IEH damages adequate to compensate for FSNS's infringing activities, including supplemental damages for any post-verdict infringement up until entry of the final judgment with an accounting as needed, together with prejudgment and post-judgment interest on the damages awarded; all of these damages to be enhanced in an amount up to treble the amount of compensatory damages under 35 U.S.C. § 284;

E. Declaring that this case is exceptional under 35 U.S.C. § 285 and awarding IEH its reasonable costs and expenses of litigation, including attorneys' and experts' fees; and

F. Granting a permanent injunction pursuant to 35 U.S.C. § 283 enjoining FSNS, its agents, employees, officers, attorneys, successors, assigns, and all persons in active concert or participation with them, from further acts of infringement of United States Patent Nos. 7,534,584, 8,822,143, and 9,637,771 and from using methods or making, offering for sale, or selling products that infringe one or more of the independent claims of either patent either literally or under the doctrine of equivalents; and

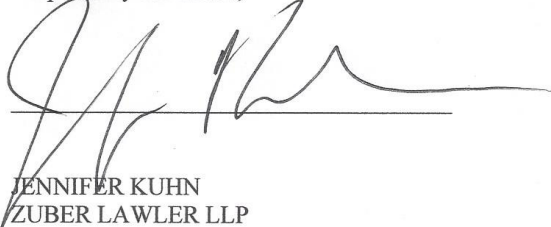
G. Awarding IEH such other and further relief as the Court may deem just and proper.

JURY DEMAND

IEH demands a trial by jury on all issues so triable.

Dated: February 25, 2021.

Respectfully submitted,



JENNIFER KUHN
ZUBER LAWLER LLP
100 Congress Avenue, Suite 2000
Austin, TX 78701
Tel: 512-717-7431
jkuhn@zuberlawler.com

DAVIS WRIGHT TREMAINE LLP
920 Fifth Avenue, Suite 3300
Seattle, WA 98104-1610
Tel: 206-633-3150
Fax: 206-757-7700
benbyer@dwt.com
jenniferchung@dwt.com

*Attorneys for Plaintiff Institute for
Environmental Health, Inc.*

COMPLAINT FOR PATENT INFRINGEMENT

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EXHIBIT A



US007534584B2

(12) **United States Patent**
Samadpour(10) **Patent No.:** **US 7,534,584 B2**(45) **Date of Patent:** **May 19, 2009**(54) **MODULAR COMPOSITING-MULTIPLE LOT
SCREENING PROTOCOLS FOR DETECTION
OF PATHOGENS, MICROBIAL
CONTAMINANTS AND/OR CONSTITUENTS**(75) Inventor: **Mansour Samadpour**, Seattle, WA (US)(73) Assignee: **Institute for Environmental Health,
Inc.**, Lake Forest Park, WA (US)(*) Notice: Subject to any disclaimer, the term of this
patent is extended or adjusted under 35
U.S.C. 154(b) by 310 days.(21) Appl. No.: **11/199,871**(22) Filed: **Aug. 8, 2005**(65) **Prior Publication Data**

US 2006/0134726 A1 Jun. 22, 2006

Related U.S. Application Data(60) Provisional application No. 60/599,473, filed on Aug.
6, 2004.(51) **Int. Cl.**

C12Q 1/24	(2006.01)
C12Q 1/04	(2006.01)
C12Q 1/06	(2006.01)
C12Q 1/08	(2006.01)
C12Q 1/10	(2006.01)
C12Q 1/14	(2006.01)
C12Q 1/20	(2006.01)

(52) **U.S. Cl.** **435/34; 435/32; 435/36;**
435/38; 435/39; 435/40; 435/849(58) **Field of Classification Search** 435/32,
435/34, 36, 38, 39, 40, 849
See application file for complete search history.(56) **References Cited****OTHER PUBLICATIONS**

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Primary Examiner—Jon P Weber

Assistant Examiner—Kailash C Srivastava

(74) Attorney, Agent, or Firm—Barry L. Davison; Davis Wright Tremaine LLP

(57) **ABSTRACT**

Particular aspects provide a method of sampling, testing and validating test lots (e.g., single-unit production lots), comprising: assembling a plurality of product portions from each of a plurality of test lots and combining the collected product portions to provide a corresponding set of test lot samples (wherein each test lot sample is attributed to a particular corresponding test lot); enriching the set of test lot samples; removing equal portions of each enriched sample, and combining the removed portions to provide a modular composite sample; and testing of the modular composite sample for the target agent/organism, wherein where such testing is positive, individual test lots may nonetheless yet be validated by further testing of a respective enriched test lot sample and obtaining a negative test result. The methods have broad utility for monitoring all sort of test lots (e.g., environmental lots, production lots, pharmaceutical lots, etc.) and for efficiently affecting informed, targeted remedial measures.

33 Claims, No Drawings

US 7,534,584 B2

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MODULAR COMPOSITING-MULTIPLE LOT SCREENING PROTOCOLS FOR DETECTION OF PATHOGENS, MICROBIAL CONTAMINANTS AND/OR CONSTITUENTS

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

The present application claims the benefit of priority to U.S. Provisional Patent Application Ser. No. 60/599,473, filed 6 Aug. 2004 and entitled MODULAR WET COMPOSITING-MULTIPLE LOT SCREENING PROTOCOLS FOR DETECTION OF PATHOGENS, which is incorporated by reference herein in its entirety.

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

Aspects of the present invention relate generally to improving the efficiency of producing food and health related (e.g., pharmaceutical) products, and the safety and quality thereof. Particular embodiments relate to novel methods for microbial pathogen testing that allow for enhanced sensitivity, cost savings and traceability (e.g. source tracking) for remedial purposes. The methods are broadly applicable to many product areas including, but not limited to beef, pork, sheep, bison, deer, elk, poultry (e.g., chicken and turkey) and fish and other seafoods, produce, juices, dairy products, dry goods (cereals, nuts, etc), fruits and vegetables, herbs and spices, and all manners of raw and processed foods, environmental samples (water, wastewater, soil, surface samples, air samples taken by impingers and filtration, etc), pharmaceuticals, and other types of samples to be analyzed using microorganism enrichment-detection protocols.

BACKGROUND

Manufacturers and respective regulatory agencies strive to continually improve the safety and the quality of foods, pharmaceuticals, nutraceuticals, water and the environment. Under recent United States Department of Agriculture, Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) directives and guidelines, many food producers in the United States have adopted sampling plans that involve testing, for example, of raw beef trims and/or ground beef for *E. coli* O157:H7, and ready-to-eat products for *Listeria monocytogenes* and/or *Salmonella*. Similar trends are observed in other countries, for products detained for domestic consumption and/or export. For example, the pharmaceutical industry spends considerable resources on sterility testing and environmental monitoring, and the water and wastewater industry and their respective regulatory agencies allocate considerable resources to monitor the quality of water (e.g., drinking, recreational and fisheries resources), wastewater (treated and untreated) and sludge (biosolids). Concern for the quality of air has resulted in monitoring of indoor air for the presence of microbial contaminants and pathogens. These sampling plans associated with such testing determine, for example, the disposition of products and the production lots, or result in decisions regarding the safety of water, receiving waters and recreational waters, and the impact of wastewater discharge, and quality of air.

The operative art with respect to such product "hold and release" monitoring efforts comprises various different sampling plans, typically pursuant to International Commission on Microbial Specifications for Food (ICMSF) guidelines for testing food products, FDA and USDA or EPA guidelines, or intuitive sampling plans. The common feature of these sam-

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pling plans is that several samples representing production lots, or a number of environmental samples, are combined into a combined production lot prior to sampling. For example, a typical plan for microbial pathogen detection calls for taking more than one sample, for instance ten (10) to sixty (60) sample pieces from a given sample lot (combined production lot), to form a composite sample for testing. The number of pieces taken to form the composite sample depends, under ICMSF or other regulatory guidelines, on the outcome of infection/poisoning (e.g., the severity), the level of hazards, and potential increase in the hazard levels due to storage. The same holds true in detecting microbial constituents and/or spoilage organisms. With respect to *E. coli* O157 testing, for example, a typical plan calls for taking 60 samples (e.g., sample pieces) from a production lot to form a single composite sample. With respect to *Listeria monocytogenes*, thirty (30) samples are typically taken from a production lot to form a composite sample. With respect to sterility testing, a typical plan may call for compositing 10-100 units of the product, and in the case of environmental sampling, 2-10 samples are often composited. Generally, the number of samples that are composited reflects: the overall sensitivity of the test method and the limit of detection that applies to the test unit; the ability to concentrate/enrich the composite sample to achieve the desired sensitivity; and the cost of sampling compared with the cost of analysis.

The costs associated with testing food are substantial, and consequently manufacturer's often resort to increasing the size of the "production lot" to be tested. For instance, the standard size production lot for trim testing for *E. coli* O157 in the U.S. beef industry is five (5) 'combos' (each combo weighing approximately 2,000 pounds), and for *Listeria* and *Salmonella* in ready-to-eat (RTE) products, it is one composite sample per production line per shift. A primary problem associated with the use of large size test lots is that a large quantity of products must be downgraded or destroyed when there is a positive finding of a pathogen. Additionally, because of the nature of combination 'lotting' (combining, for purposes of forming the test lot, several independent sub-lots that collectively span a long period of production time), it is very difficult to investigate the cause of the failure and pinpoint the source/cause, and remedial measures cannot be effectively taken. Furthermore, compositing a large number of samples may result in reduced sensitivity for the test unit and adversely effect the limit of detection.

Typically, once a composite sample is constructed (following the art with respect to particular testing) it is then enriched for the presence of a given pathogen/microbe by addition of appropriate amounts of enrichment media and incubation at an appropriate temperature for a given amount of time. If the pathogen/microbe is present, then it grows and multiplies under the favorable conditions of enrichment, thereby providing more material which can be detected by subsequent analysis. The composite sample is then tested by one or more available, art recognized methods including, for example, enrichment followed by immunoassay-based tests or PCR-based methods, or culturing of the organism of interest, or other DNA- or immunochemical-based methods.

The above-described prior art has several substantial deficiencies. First, even though the prior art production lot encompasses several production sublots (for instance 5 combo/pallets of products, or an entire shift of production), if a positive finding is obtained for the production lot (composite test sample), the entire production lot is rejected (all 5 combos/pallets, or one shift of production) and diverted to economically undesirable end uses (e.g., cooking or disposal), even though the pathogen of concern may be confined

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to only a limited portion of the production sublots (corresponding to one or two combos/pallets or an hour of production) comprising the production lot.

Second, the current art does not allow for retesting of any production sublots, primarily because microbial contaminants are unevenly spread throughout the products, and in many instances the levels of contamination are minute and may be present on very small portions of the products in each subplot. Therefore, once a composite sample is constructed if it tests positive all of the sublots are destroyed. The regulatory agencies do not allow for re-testing of the sublots, premised on the argument that after a production lot tests positive, negative test results obtained for production sublots, or even a new production lot composite sample, are meaningless since the microbial contaminants are not uniformly present throughout the products.

Third, the current protocols for collecting a composite sample representing a production lot often group together production sublots that are unrelated by virtue of product type or hours of production. This makes investigating the nature of the failure a difficult task even when relevant information is available. As an example, information is frequently available on a 'per combo' basis including (but not limited to) hour of production, vendor source of raw materials, production employees present, and operational status of microbial intervention process steps. However, when five unrelated combos/pallets are included in a production lot it is much harder to rationally analyze the available information since there is no way to determine which combo(s) contained the pathogen (as stated above, prior art re-sampling is not a viable option since it may not yield the same result). Likewise, for sterility testing, when the composite sample tests positive, the entire production will be disposed.

Therefore, there is a pronounced need in the art to implement novel and effective testing protocols that provide a greater measure of assurance that the food product is safe, that provide economic relief to the producer, and that allow for effective tracking of the contaminated lot(s) for remedial purposes (e.g., pinpointing the time of the contamination and determine the segment of production which was impacted).

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

Aspects of the present invention provide novel enrichment, testing and detection methods for detection of pathogens or other microbes in, for example, food, water, wastewater, industrial, pharmaceutical, botanical, environmental samples and other types of samples analyzed by detection methods (e.g., enrichment-detection methods). According to particular aspects, where any microbiological testing program involves compositing a number of samples to form a test lot, independent enrichment of each of the components of the composite sample is performed with subsequent formation of a modular (e.g., wet modula) composite sample by combining portions from each independent enrichment, which allows for determining the outcome of the test for each individual subunit of the composite as opposed to generalizing the results of the test sample to all of its subunits. This individual outcome determination is achieved by retesting the individual enrichment samples in the event that the composite enrichment tests positive.

In preferred aspects, a reportable lot is defined as a single unit of a modular (e.g., modular wet) composite lot, rather than as an entire composite lot comprised of multiple sublots. For example, a reportable production lot is defined as a single unit of production and corresponds to a single unit of a modular wet composite production lot, rather than (as in the prior

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art) as an entire composite lot comprised of multiple production units (multiple sublots). With respect to testing each reportable lot (e.g., each single unit of production), a plurality of pieces/portions of sample are separately collected from each single reportable lot (e.g., from each single production unit; individual test unit) and composited to form, for example, one 'single-unit production lot sample' (corresponding, in each case, to a particular single unit of production), which is enriched using appropriate enrichment protocols to allow for the levels of the target organism to reach detection levels and uniformity of presence in the enriched sample. Multiple aliquots of the enrichment media may be removed for analysis, thus circumventing the prior art problem of having to re-sample a test production lot where microbial contaminants are not uniformly present throughout the product.

In the exemplary context of enriched single units of production, equal portions of enrichment buffer are removed (aseptically) from each single-unit production lot sample and combined to form a Modular Wet Composite Sample (MWCS). The MWCS is then tested using an appropriate test (detection assay) for the target agent (e.g., target organism). If a negative result is obtained from the MWCS, then all of the individual single-unit production lots are released. Significantly, if a positive result is obtained from a MWCS, the enrichment buffers from each of the individual single-unit production lot samples are separately (individually) tested, using the same test protocol, or a test protocol with enhanced sensitivity, or any appropriate test protocol. According to particular preferred aspects, the signal obtained from a MWCS is due to one or more of its components (e.g., reportable lots (e.g., individually enriched single production units)), and it is, therefore, possible in all cases to trace a positive signal to one or more individual subunits by testing each individual enrichment sample for the same target. When a positive finding is obtained for any individual reportable lot sample (e.g., single-unit production lot sample), that particular reportable lot (e.g., single-unit production lot) is deemed to be positive, and appropriate actions are taken based on the result. In the case of pathogen/microbial testing for foods, the individual positive sublots can be diverted to cooking, disposal, or other acceptably safe endpoint. The rest of the individually enriched test units that test negative are deemed to be negative and will be reported as such (are validated).

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

Particular aspects provide novel enrichment, testing and validation methods for detection of pathogens or other microbes in any type of samples (e.g., food production lots, water, wastewater, industrial, pharmaceutical, botanical, environmental samples, etc.) analyzable by enrichment-detection methods. In preferred aspects, a test lot (single-unit production lot), rather than (as in the prior art) a composite lot comprised of multiple test lots (e.g., single-unit production lot units), is defined and established as the single unit of production. A plurality of portions (e.g., product portions) are separately collected from each test lot (e.g., single-unit production lot) and composited to form a corresponding set of test lot samples (e.g., single-unit production lot samples), which are enriched using suitable enrichment protocols to allow target agents/organisms to reach detectable levels and sample uniformity. In particular embodiments, equal portions of enrichment buffer are removed (preferably aseptically) from the enriched samples, and combined to form a modular composite sample (e.g., modular wet composite sample; MWCS). The MWCS, for example, is tested using a suitable

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detection assay for the target agent/organism. If a negative result is obtained from the MWCS, then all of the individual single-unit production lots are validated and releasable. If a positive result is obtained from a MWCS, the enrichment sample corresponding to individual test lots (e.g., individual single-unit production lots) are separately (individually) tested, using the same, or a more sensitive test protocol. If a positive finding is obtained for any test lot sample (e.g., individual single-unit production lot sample), that particular respective lot is diverted to cooking, disposal, or other acceptably safe endpoint. If a negative finding is obtained for any individual test lot sample (e.g., single-unit production lot sample), then that particular lot is validated and releasable. In this manner, any member lot of the MWCS that tests negative using the same method (about 5-fold more sensitive relative to the prior art), or an enhanced method (about fifty times more sensitive), will be validated and releasable for consumption.

Definitions

The term “test lot” or “reportable lot” as used herein to refer to an assemblage of one or more specimens of a medium or process (e.g., assemblage of specimens of air, water, solids, or of products of a production process, etc.), where such assemblage can be sampled by taking portions of the one or more specimens thereof, and where the one or more specimens of the assemblage are operationally linked in a manner (e.g., proximity, time, process step, etc.) whereby information derived about sampled portions is operationally applicable to all specimens of the assemblage, and thus to the test lot. In particular instances, portions are synonymous with specimens.

The term “single production unit” or “single-unit production lot” as used herein is a form of test lot, and refers to a single unit of production (e.g. for beef trim a “combo,” or for almonds a “bin”) rather than, as in the prior art, to a composite comprised of multiple, non-operationally linked single production units (production sublots).

The term “product portion” as used herein refers to a product piece (e.g., a piece of solid beef trim, etc.), aliquot of product (e.g., a volume of liquid juice) or weight of product (e.g., a weight of semi-solid pudding). A single unit of production is composed of multiple product portions. In preferred embodiments, the number of product portions which comprise a single unit of production is great enough that removal of some product portions to form a sample does not impose an unacceptable economic loss to the producer. In particular instances, a product portion may be a specimen of a test lot as defined above.

The term “compositing” as used herein refers to combining a number of single product portions to form one larger sample. In preferred embodiments, the number and selection of single product portions to be combined conform to statistical-based sampling plans which seek to form a typical or average sample that is representative of the test lot (e.g., single production unit) being sampled.

The term “test lot sample” or “single-unit production lot sample” or “single production unit lot sample,” as used herein refers to a sample formed by combining multiple product portions from a test lot (e.g., single production unit), such that each test sample (e.g., each single-unit production lot sample) is attributed to a particular corresponding test lot (e.g., production unit). For production lot samples, the number of portions/pieces combined may be essentially any number, but preferably is selected so as to conform to statistical-based sampling plans. Preferably the number of pieces combined is selected from the range group consisting of from about 5 to

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about 100, from about 10 to about 90, from about 20 to about 80, from about 30 to about 70, from about 30 to about 60, and from about 40 to about 50 product portions. Preferably, the number of independent product portions is selected so as to yield a sample size that is equal to or greater than that required by the subsequent analysis to be applied.

The term “enrichment” as used herein refers to incubating a test lot sample (e.g., single-unit production lot sample) under conditions suitable to allow levels of a target agent/organism that is present to reach detectable levels and become uniform or substantially uniform throughout the enriched test lot sample (e.g., single-unit production lot sample). Preferably, enrichment comprises addition of an amount of an enrichment medium or buffer to a sample, and incubating the sample at a favorable temperature for a period of time sufficient to allow the organism to grow and multiply.

The term “enrichment medium” as used herein refers to a mixture which contains nutrients and which has properties (e.g., pH and/or oxygen content) which favor the growth of the target agent/organism. Preferably, the enrichment medium is formulated to mimic the environment of the target agent/organism or take advantage of a known metabolic property of the target agent/organism. Preferably, the enrichment medium will omit nutrients needed by competing undesired agents/organisms. Preferably, the enrichment medium will include selective agents that will inhibit competing undesired agents/organisms. An example of an enrichment medium is that used for the isolation of nitrogen fixing bacteria (those that can use nitrogen gas as their sole nitrogen source) contains no source of fixed nitrogen in the medium. A second example is an enrichment medium for the isolation of bacteria capable of utilizing 2,4-dichlorophenoxyacetic acid (also known as 2,4-D, a common herbicide) as a source of carbon and energy. The enrichment medium is formulated to contain benzoate as the only organic compound.

The term “wet enrichment” as used herein refers to diluting a solid, semisolid or liquid single-unit production lot sample (single production unit lot sample) with enrichment medium in a ratio of approximately 1:10 (wt/v), consistent with conventional methods for expanding and testing a variety of target agents/organisms as set forth in widely recognized published methods. For example, the conventional method for expanding and testing for coliforms, fecal coliforms and *E. Coli* in food, comprises a 1:10 dilution of the samples (e.g., 50 g into 450 ml) (see, e.g., U.S. FDA Bacteriology Analytical Manual Online, Chapter 4 and 4A, describing standard 1:10 dilution procedures for testing of coliforms, fecal coliforms and *E. Coli* in food, shellfish and juices).

The term “dry enrichment” as used herein refers to enriching a solid, semisolid or liquid single unit production lot sample either with no addition of other compounds if the sample’s intrinsic properties (water activity, nutrients and pH) are sufficient/proper to promote the growth of the target agent/organism, or by dilution of the sample with minimal amounts of enrichment medium in ratios ranging from about 0.1 (wt/v) to about 1 (wt/v).

The term “modular composite sample” as used herein refers to a sample formed by removing, preferably aseptically, equal portions of each of a plurality of enriched single-unit production lot samples, and combining the removed portions.

The phrase “suitable detection assay” as used herein refers to any assay that is suitable for detecting a particular agent/organism. Preferably, the assay is optimized to detect the particular agent/organism, and may be combined with one or more concentration steps for concentration of the agent/organism being assayed.

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The term “validation” as used herein with respect to production lots refers to determining that a particular sample tests negative using the detection assay. Where a modular composite sample tests negative, all single-unit production lot samples comprising the composite sample are validated along with the respective single-unit production lots, which are thus cleared for release. Where a modular composite sample tests positive, individual single unit production lots may nonetheless yet be validated if particular respective single-unit production lot samples test negative.

“Trim” refers to small pieces of meat and fat which are excised during, for example, the beef fabrication process in order to produce primal and subprimal pieces and marketable cuts.

“Trim testing” refers to the process of testing trim, or raw materials which are to be used for ground meat production for microbial/pathogen content.

A “combo” or “combo-bin” refers, in the beef industry, to the single production unit packaging unit. Alternatively raw materials corresponding to a single production unit to be tested can be packaged into boxes, bags or other appropriate containers, which can be placed, for example, on pallets.

A “composite lot-unit” or “five-combo-lot unit” refers to a composite unit, comprised of five combos (combo-bins). In prior art sampling plans, the composite lot-unit represents the raw material (composite trim) upon which sampling, testing and acceptance or rejection is based.

Therefore, according to particular aspects, a test lot (or test unit) (e.g., a single-unit production lot or single production unit lot) is defined and taken as one or more operationally-linked specimens of a medium or process. A test lot may be a single unit of production (e.g., a single combo, bin, pallet, or segment of production, etc.), or a single environmental sample (e.g., single air sample, single water and wastewater sample, etc.), rather than, as in the prior art, as a composite of multiple production units or environmental samples.

In preferred embodiments, a number of pieces or portions of sample are collected from a test lot (e.g., from a single production unit (e.g., from the single combo, bin, pallet, or segment of production, etc.), and composited to form one ‘single-unit test sample’ (or ‘single-unit production lot sample.’ In particular embodiments (e.g., wet enrichment), enrichment buffer is added to the sample. In alternate embodiments, ‘dry enrichment’ (as defined herein above) is done.

Significantly, in the inventive modular (e.g., wet modular) compositing method, samples taken from each unit of production are enriched separately using appropriate enrichment protocols to allow for the levels of the target organism to reach detection levels and uniformity of presence in the enriched sample. In preferred aspects, such enrichment obviates the prior art problem of having microbial contaminants that are not uniformly present throughout the product sample. Specifically, while microbes are not necessarily uniformly distributed in food, water, air, pharmaceuticals, etc., after enriching a sample as described herein, the target microbes are uniformly, or at least substantially uniformly, present in the enrichment medium or extract from dry or semi dried enrichments.

Following incubation for the target organism, equal portions of enrichment buffer or sample are removed (aseptically) from each of several test lot samples (e.g., from several single-unit production lot samples; preferably 5) and pulled together to form a Modular Wet Composite Sample (MWCS). The MWCS is then tested using an appropriate test (detection assay) for the target organism. If a negative result is obtained from the MWCS, then all of the individual single unit production Lots are released.

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If a positive result is obtained from a MWCS, the enrichment buffers from each of the individual single unit production lot samples are then separately (individually) tested, using the same test protocol, or any other appropriate tests. Alternately, an augmented protocol that uses a concentration step for the target organism, such as immunomagnetic bead separation, affinity chromatography, etc., followed by an appropriate detection method is used to test the enriched individual test lot samples (e.g., the individual single-unit production lot samples).

In preferred aspects, the inventive methods of analysis are modified by introducing a concentration step (e.g., employing antibody-coated paramagnetic beads into the procedure (e.g., DNA-based detection, biosensor based detection, classical microbiological detections, etc)). Antibody-coated paramagnetic beads, for example, afford an approximately 10-fold increase in sensitivity. This concentration step, combined with the fact that the individual test lot samples (e.g., individual single-unit production lot samples) are not 5-fold diluted relative to the MWCS, allows for an overall 50-fold increase in sensitivity relative to prior art sampling and testing protocols. If a lateral flow device is used for detection, such immunomagnetic concentration may or may not be used, in which case the detection sensitivity is increased by about 5-fold.

Where a positive finding (test result) is obtained for any individual test lot sample (e.g., single-unit production lot sample), that particular corresponding test lot (e.g., single-unit production lot) is deemed to be positive, and appropriate decisions are then made on the positive results (e.g., in the case of food products, diversion to cooking, disposal, or other acceptably safe endpoint). For each of the rest of the test lot samples (e.g., single-unit production lot samples) belonging to the positive MWCS, where a negative finding is obtained, that particular test lot sample (e.g., that single-unit production lots sample) is deemed to be negative. In this manner, any test lot (e.g., any single-unit production lot) that is a member of the group of test lots (e.g., single-unit production lots) that comprise a corresponding MWCS, will be considered to be negative, if it tests negative using the same method (about 5-fold more sensitive relative to the prior art), or the enhanced method (about fifty times more sensitive).

In alternate preferred embodiments, a new Modular Wet Composite Sample is reconstructed from the member lots (test lots) that have tested negative, and subjected to a third layer of testing to again show (confirm) that they are negative. Specifically if one of the five individual test lots (e.g., individual single-unit production lots) has tested positive (and the other four negative), and the protocols call for testing of composites consisting of five test lots, a new single test lot sample can be formed from a new test lot, and can be used along with the four negative samples to form a new MWCS.

The methods of the present invention provide substantial economic savings to the food and pharmaceutical industries, because of the precision in detecting in the context of operationally-linked portions of production (e.g., test lots; single production units; single-unit production lots) which are contaminated. The inventive methods prevent unnecessary destruction of negative lots that are condemned because of guilt by association (e.g., simply because they were grouped with a contaminated composite prior art multiple production unit lot in a prior art testing protocol). Where a positive finding is obtained, a smaller quantity of material is diverted to an economically undesirable end use. The proposed invention has substantial utility (e.g., bringing savings, accuracy and precision in pinpointing problems) in the environmental industry.

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Additionally, and significantly, it is easier to trace the source of the contamination and apply remedial measures, because the single-unit test component points, for example, to single point of production or a single sampling site.

Particular Preferred Aspects:

Particular aspect provide a method of sampling, testing and validating test lots, comprising: separately collecting a plurality of portions from each of a plurality of test lots, the test lots each comprising an assemblage of one or more operationally-linked specimens, wherein the assemblage can be sampled by taking portions thereof; combining the collected portions corresponding to each of the test lots to provide a corresponding set of test lot samples, wherein each test lot sample is attributed to a particular corresponding test lot; incubating the set of test lot samples under conditions suitable to allow levels of a target agent or organism that is present in one or more of the samples to reach detectable levels and become uniform, or substantially uniform, throughout the respective one or more samples, to provide a set of enriched test lot samples; removing, aseptically, equal portions of each enriched test lot sample, and combining the removed portions to provide a modular composite sample; and testing of the modular composite sample, using a suitable detection assay, for the target agent or organism, wherein where such testing is negative all test lot samples are validated, and wherein where such testing is positive, individual test lots may nonetheless yet be validated by further testing of a portion of the respective enriched test lot sample using the same or a more sensitive protocol and obtaining a negative test result.

In particular aspects, the test lot is selected from the group consisting of an environmental lot comprising one or more operationally-linked environmental specimens, pharmaceutical lot comprising one or more operationally-linked pharmaceutical specimens, single-unit product lot comprising one or more operationally-linked product specimens, and combinations thereof. In particular aspects, the test lot is a single-unit production lot, comprised of operationally-linked product specimens. In particular aspects, product specimens are synonymous with product portions. In particular aspects, the methods further comprise incubating the modular composite sample prior to testing it. In particular aspects, incubating each test lot sample comprises adding an amount of enrichment medium to the sample, and removing enriched sample portions comprises removing a portion of the enrichment medium from each enriched sample and combining the removed portions to provide a modular composite sample. In particular aspects, testing of the modular composite sample, using a suitable detection assay comprises use of a concentration step to concentrate the microbial agent or organism.

In particular aspects, where testing of the modular composite sample is positive, and wherein the individual test lots are further tested, such further testing comprises use of the more sensitive protocol. Preferably, the more sensitive protocol comprises use of a concentration step to concentrate the microbial agent or organism, in combination with the same test protocol used to test the modular composite sample.

In particular aspects, the methods further comprise forming an additional modular composite sample from the enriched test lot samples and testing the additional modular composite sample, using the same or a different suitable assay, to confirm the testing status. In particular aspects, the methods further comprise forming an additional modular composite sample from an additional enriched test lot sample

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along with any enriched test lot samples that test negative, and testing the additional modular composite sample, using the same or a different suitable assay. In particular aspects, the methods further comprise, where testing of the modular composite sample is negative, forming an additional modular composite sample from the enriched test lot samples, and testing the additional modular composite sample, using a different suitable assay, to confirm the negative testing status.

In particular aspects, the test lot is selected from the lot group consisting of a single combo, single bin, single pallet, and a segment of production. Preferably, the number of test lots is from about 3 to about 10, about 5 to about 8, or about 5.

In particular aspects, the methods further comprise, where testing of the modular composite sample is positive, determining which individual test lots are positive, and application of remedial measures that are specific to one or more individual test lots that test positive. In particular aspects, separately collecting a plurality of portions from each of a plurality of test lots comprises separately collecting from each test lot a number of portions selected from the group consisting of from about 5 to about 100, from about 10 to about 90, from about 20 to about 80, from about 30 to about 70, from about 30 to about 60, and from about 40 to about 50 portions. Preferably, separately collecting a plurality of portions from each of a plurality of test lots comprises separately collecting from each test lot about 30 to about 60 portions. Alternatively, separately collecting a plurality of portions from each of a plurality of test lots comprises separately collecting from each test lot about 30 portions. Preferably, separately collecting a plurality of portions from each of a plurality of test lots comprises separately collecting from each test lot about 60 portions.

Particular aspects provide a method of sampling, testing and validating test lots, comprising: separately collecting a plurality of portions from each of a plurality of single-unit production lots, the single-unit production lots each comprising an assemblage of one or more product specimens, wherein the assemblage can be sampled by taking portions thereof; combining the collected product portions corresponding to each of the single-unit production lots to provide a corresponding set of single-unit production lot samples, wherein each single-unit production lot sample is attributed to a particular corresponding single-unit production lot; incubating the set of single-unit production lot samples under conditions suitable to allow levels of a target agent or organism that is present in one or more of the single-unit production lot samples to reach detectable levels and become uniform, or substantially uniform, throughout the respective one or more samples, to provide a set of enriched single-unit production lot samples; removing, aseptically, equal portions of each enriched single-unit production lot sample, and combining the removed portions to provide a modular composite sample; and testing of the modular composite sample, using a suitable detection assay, for the target agent or organism, wherein where such testing is negative all single-unit production lot samples are validated, and wherein where such testing is positive, individual single-unit production lots may nonetheless yet be validated by further testing of a portion of the respective enriched single-unit production lot sample using the same or a more sensitive protocol and obtaining a negative test result.

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The following Examples are exemplary are not intended, and should not be construed to limit the scope of the aspects of the present conception that are claimed hereunder.

EXAMPLE I

The Present Inventive Methods were Shown to Provide a Substantial Economic Advantage, While Providing for Enhanced Safety, and Implementation of Remedial Measures

At present, the standard size 'production lot' for trim testing for *E. coli* O157 in the beef industry in the USA is a combination of five combos, where each combo represents a single production unit and weighs approximately 2,000 pounds. An inventive modular composite sample method, and in particular a Modular Wet Composite Sample (MWCS) method was implemented at a United States beef producer. TABLE 1 shows, according particular aspects, the result of testing 62,919 MWCS samples, and then retesting the individual single-unit production lot (combo) samples whenever a positive result was obtained from the MWCS sample.

TABLE 1 shows that out of 62,919 MWCS samples, a total of 217 yielded a positive testing result for *E. coli* O157. Using prior art protocols, all of the single-unit production lots that comprised the 217 positive samples would go to rendering or be downgraded for cooking. As each MWCS represents five single-unit production lots of 2,000 lbs each, this would represent approximately 2,710,000 pounds of product (i.e., $271 \times 5 \times 2,000 \text{ pounds} = 2,710,000 \text{ pounds}$).

Specifically, the individual single-unit production lot samples comprising the MWCS were analyzed separately following each positive MWCS result. As can be seen in TABLE 1, only 391 individual single-unit production lot samples yielded a positive result out of the cumulative total of 1,085 individual single-unit production lot samples comprising the MWCS samples which yielded a positive result. If only the 391 individual single-unit production lots yielding a positive sample result were diverted to rendering or downgraded for cooking this would represent 782,000 lbs of product. The remaining 694 individual single-unit production lots, corresponding to 1,928,000 lbs of product, are, according to preferred aspects of the present invention, validated and releasable into the chain of commerce.

The product, in this Example I, being produced by this U.S. beef producer was beef trim. The release of the validated 19,280,000 lbs of beef trim into commerce using the present invention, instead of diverting or downgrading the product, trim, represents a cost savings to the producer of about \$2,500,000, relative to prior art methods. Additionally, the testing of the single-unit production lots by augmented testing protocols (representing a 5- to 50-fold increase in sensitivity relative to the MWCS testing) provides substantial additional assurance of the safety of the food products.

Furthermore, as outlined above under "BACKGROUND," information is frequently available on a 'per combo' basis including, but not limited to hour of production, vendor source of raw materials, production employees present, and operational status of microbial intervention process steps. However, when five unrelated combos are included in a combined 'production lot' (as in the prior art) it is much harder to rationally analyze the available information since there is no way to determine which combo(s) contained the pathogen (as stated above, prior art re-sampling is not a viable option since it may not yield the same result).

By contrast, in this Example I and according to preferred aspects of the present invention, any combo-specific informa-

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tion including, but not limited to hour of production, vendor source of raw materials, production employees present, and operational status of microbial intervention process steps can be brought to bear in the context of the 391 individual single-unit production lots yielding a positive sample result, thereby providing an effective means not only to trace contamination, but also to affect remedial measures in view thereof.

TABLE 1

Results of modular wet composite sampling of 62,919 multiple lots and number of Individual Production Unit Lot (IPUL) which tested positive when MWCS tested positive

Location	Total # Analyses	# Positives	1	2	3	4	5
			IPUL	IPULs	IPULs	IPULs	IPULs
Est. A, B, C.	62,919	271	180	39	18	11	7

EXAMPLE II

According to Particular Aspects of the Present Invention, the Inventive Sampling Methods have Substantial Utility in the Context of Ready-to-Eat (RTE) Products (e.g., Meat and Poultry Products)

Under United States Department of Agriculture, Food Safety and Inspection Service (USDA FSIS) guidelines, producers of Ready-to-Eat (RTE) meat and poultry products may adapt an 'end product' sampling program as verification that their product is free of the pathogen *Listeria monocytogenes*. The frequency of end product sampling is selected by the producer/establishment, based on valid sampling statistics. Typically, samples are collected at random times over a production shift (e.g., from 'cleanup to cleanup'), and from several product lines. The samples are combined to form a composite sample, and enrichment buffer is added to the composite sample to allow *Listeria* spp. or *L. monocytogenes* to grow and multiply under the favorable conditions of enrichment, thereby providing more material that can be detected by subsequent analysis.

According to particular aspects of the present invention the producer of RTE meat or poultry products collects samples from individual single-unit production lots. Preferably, the producer defines and produces these single-unit lots in such a fashion as to maximize the information available for investigating the nature of a failure. For example, possible definitions of an individual single-unit production lot include, but are limited to all of the product produced by a particular production line (or produced by a particular production line in a particular period of time), a volume of product such as a pallet of packed boxes produced on a particular production line, or a production area in the plant, etc.

Individual single-unit production lot samples are collected, to which, in wet enrichment embodiments, enrichment medium/buffer is added. Following incubation under conditions suitable to allow levels of a target agent or organism that is present to reach detectable levels and become uniform or substantially uniform throughout the respective sample(s), aliquots of the enrichment medium/buffers from individual single-unit production lot samples are combined to form a MWCS. The MWCS is then analyzed for the presence or absence of, for example, *Listeria* spp. or *L. monocytogenes*. In the event that a positive result is obtained for the MWCS, enrichment medium/buffer sample from the individual

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single-unit production lot samples comprising that MWCS is analyzed using the same, or augmented testing protocols.

Individual single-unit production lots for which the enrichment medium/buffer from the corresponding sample yields a positive result are diverted to cooking, disposal or other safety endpoint. Individual single-unit production lots for which the enrichment medium/buffer from the corresponding sample yields a negative result are released into commerce. The latter fraction represents a direct cost savings to the producer relative to a prior art approaches where a 'production lot' is defined to include multiple single-unit production lots (e.g., multiple product lines and an extended period of time ('cleanup to cleanup')).

Furthermore, by defining and establishing the individual single-unit production lots in such a fashion as to maximize the information available for investigating the nature of a failure, the producer is able to narrow the scope of investigation and apply remediative resources more effectively and efficiently. For example, where a positive result(s) is associated with one or more specific production lines, targeted aggressive sanitation is used to resolve the problem. Alternatively, for example, where a positive result(s) is associated with one or more specific products, determining whether raw materials are contaminated, or whether process microbial intervention steps were operating properly are effectively and efficiently used.

EXAMPLE III

According to Particular Aspects of the Present Invention, the Inventive Sampling Methods have Substantial Utility for Providing Cost-Effective and Effective Monitoring Means for Pathogen Levels in Nut Products (e.g., Almond Products) and the Like

A large number of almond products may be produced by using one or more processes including slivering, scalding, blanching, slicing, roasting, and dicing. Anti-microbial treatments may also be applied, such as use of propylene oxide. In practice, these processes may be used in many various combinations, and the output from one process may be the input for another. This makes it very difficult to trace finished product all the way back to raw materials.

As indicated by a recent outbreak, almond products are susceptible to contamination by *Salmonella* spp. According to additional aspects, the present inventive methods provide a cost-effective means of implementing an effective monitoring program for pathogen levels in nut products (e.g., almond products). In such embodiments, final almond products of each type are collected at random times over a production shift. The producer defines and establishes individual single-unit production lots as the amount of product produced during a production shift (from 'cleanup to cleanup'), or as some smaller production unit (e.g., a 'truckload'), provided that one sample was collected from each such single-unit production lot. The single-unit production lot samples are combined to form a corresponding composite sample, and, in wet enrichment embodiments, enrichment medium/buffer is added to the composite sample to allow *Salmonella* spp. to grow and multiply under the favorable conditions of enrichment (as described herein above), thereby providing more material that can be detected by subsequent analysis.

Aliquots of the enrichment medium/buffers from individual single-unit production lot samples are combined to form a MWCS. The MWCS are analyzed for the presence or absence, for example, of *Salmonella* spp. Where a positive result is obtained for the MWCS, each enrichment buffer

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from the individual single-unit production lot samples comprising that MWCS is analyzed using the same, or augmented testing protocols.

Individual single-unit production lots for which the enrichment buffer from the corresponding sample yields a positive result are returned for application of additional microbial intervention steps (e.g., roasting), or are diverted to a safe endpoint (e.g., a cooked product). Individual single-unit production lots for which the enrichment buffer from the corresponding sample yields a negative result are thereby validated and are releasable into commerce. The latter fraction represents a direct cost savings to the producer relative to prior art approaches where effective testing is not done, and discovery of contamination with a pathogen leads to large scale recalls of product.

Furthermore, by defining and establishing the individual production single-unit production lots in such a fashion as to maximize the information available for investigating the nature of a failure, the producer is able to narrow the scope of investigation and apply remediative resources more effectively and efficiently. For example, the processes used to produce the almond product(s) yielding positive result(s) are rationally analyzed, and associations between the pathogen contamination and one or more of the processes of slivering, scalding, blanching, slicing, roasting, and dicing are determined, and targeted effective and efficient remedial measures are applied.

EXAMPLE IV

According to Particular Aspects of the Present Invention, the Inventive Sampling Methods have Substantial Utility in the Context of Contaminants that Enter a Production Line at a Given Time Point, and then Clear

Sterility testing of food and pharmaceuticals, or purity testing of fermentation processes often involves compositing a number of samples to form a composite test lot. Detection of microbial contamination in the composite sample, as discussed in detail herein above, results in rejection of the whole production. Practically speaking, often a pinpoint contaminant enters production at a given time point, and then clears within a few minutes. Aspects of the present invention allow for identifying the time of entry, and informed elimination of products (operationally linked test lots) flanking the contamination event.

EXAMPLE V

According to Particular Aspects of the Present Invention, the Inventive Sampling Methods have Substantial Utility in the Context of Environmental Monitoring (e.g., with Samples of Water, Wastewater, Sludge, Soil, Surface Sponges, Surface Swabs, Condensates, Air or Liquids)

In the context of environmental monitoring, when several samples (water, wastewater, sludge, soil, surface sponges, surface swabs, condensates, air or liquids) are composited and subjected to enrichment, followed by testing to detect environmental contamination, the current invention allows for pinpointing the test lots (e.g., operationally-linked unit(s)) that are positive for the microbe of concern.

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The invention claimed is:

1. A method of sampling, testing and validating test lots for microbial contamination, comprising:

- a) collecting a plurality of portions from each of a plurality of test lots, the test lots each comprising an assemblage of one or more specimens, wherein each test lot is separately sampled by taking said plurality of portions thereof;
- b) combining the collected plurality of portions corresponding to each of the separate test lots to provide a corresponding set of separate test lot samples, wherein each separate test lot sample is attributed to a particular corresponding separate test lot;
- c) incubating the set of separate test lot samples under conditions suitable to allow levels of a target microbial agent or organism that is present in one or more of the separate test lot samples to reach detectable levels and become uniform, or substantially uniform, throughout the respective one or more separate test lot samples, to provide a set of separate test lot samples enriched for the target microbial agent or organism;
- d) removing portions of each enriched separate test lot sample, and combining the removed portions to provide a modular composite sample; and
- e) testing of the composite sample, using a suitable detection assay, for the target microbial agent or organism, wherein when such testing is negative all of said separate test lot samples are validated, and wherein when such testing is positive, individual separate test lots are validated by further testing of a portion of the respective enriched separate test lot sample using the same or a more sensitive protocol and obtaining test result for each test lot.

2. The method of claim 1, wherein the test lot is a single-unit production lot, comprised of operationally-linked product specimens.

3. The method of claim 1, further comprising incubating the modular composite sample of d), prior to testing in e).

4. The method of claim 1, wherein incubating each separate test lot sample in c) comprises incubating each separate test lot sample with enrichment medium suitable to enrich for the target microbial agent or organism, and wherein removing in d) comprises removing a portion of the enrichment medium from each enriched separate test lot sample and combining the removed portions to provide a modular composite sample.

5. The method of claim 1, wherein testing of the modular composite sample, using a suitable detection assay further comprises a concentration step to concentrate the microbial agent or organism.

6. The method of claim 1, wherein testing in e) of the modular composite sample is positive, and wherein the individual separate test lot samples are further tested, such further testing comprises the more sensitive protocol.

7. The method of claim 1, further comprising, forming an additional modular composite sample from the set of enriched separate test lot samples of c) and testing the additional modular composite sample, using the same or a different suitable assay, to confirm the testing result.

8. The method of claim 1, further comprising, forming an additional modular composite sample from an additional enriched separate test lot sample along with any enriched separate test lot samples of c) that test negative in e), and testing the additional modular composite sample, using the same or a different suitable assay.

9. The method of claim 1, further comprising, where testing of the modular composite sample in e) is negative, forming an additional modular composite sample from the set of

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enriched separate test lot samples of c), and testing the additional modular composite sample, using a different suitable assay, to confirm the negative testing status.

10. The method of claim 1, wherein the test lot is selected from the lot group consisting of a single combo, single bin, single pallet, and a production assemblage.

11. The method of claim 1, wherein the number of separate test lots is from 3 to 10.

12. The method of claim 1, further comprising, where testing of the modular composite sample is positive, determining which individual separate test lots are positive, application of remedial measures to said separate positive test lots, and validating by further testing of a portion of the respective remediated separate test lots and obtaining a negative test result.

13. The method of claim 1, wherein, in a), separately collecting said plurality of portions from each of said plurality of separate test lots comprises separately collecting from each separate test lot a number of portions from 5 to 100.

14. The method of claim 1, wherein, in a), separately collecting said plurality of portions from each of said plurality of separate test lots comprises separately collecting from each separate test lot 30 to 60 portions.

15. The method of claim 1, wherein, in a), separately collecting said plurality of portions from each of said plurality of separate test lots comprises separately collecting 30 portions from each separate test lot.

16. The method of claim 1, wherein, in a), separately collecting said plurality of portions from each of said plurality of separate test lots comprises separately collecting from each separate test lot about 60 portions.

17. A method of sampling, testing and validating test lots for microbial contamination, comprising:

- a) collecting a plurality of portions from each of a plurality of single-unit production lots, the single-unit production lots each comprising an assemblage of one or more production specimens, wherein each single-unit production lot is separately sampled by taking said plurality of portions thereof;
- b) combining the collected plurality of product portions corresponding to each of the separate single-unit production lots to provide a corresponding set of separate single-unit production lot samples, wherein each separate single-unit production lot sample is attributed to a particular corresponding separate single-unit production lot;
- c) incubating the set of separate single-unit production lot samples under conditions suitable to allow levels of a target microbial agent or organism that is present in one or more of the separate single-unit production lot samples to reach detectable levels and become uniform, or substantially uniform, throughout the respective one or more separate single-unit production lot samples, to provide a set of separate single-unit production lot samples enriched for the target microbial agent or organism;
- d) removing portions of each enriched separate single-unit production lot sample, and combining the removed portions to provide a modular composite sample; and
- e) testing of the composite sample, using a suitable detection assay, for the target microbial agent or organism, wherein when such testing is negative all of said separate single-unit production lot samples are validated, and wherein when such testing is positive, individual separate single-unit production lots are validated by further testing of a portion of the respective enriched separate

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single-unit production lot sample using the same or a more sensitive protocol and obtaining test result for each single-unit production lot.

18. The method of claim 1, wherein removing portions in step d) is removing equal portions, aseptically, so as to preclude contamination of the enriched separate test lot samples.

19. The method of claim 1, wherein the target microbial agent or organism comprises at least one selected from the group consisting of *Listeria*, *Salmonella* and *Escherichia coli*.

20. The method of claim 1, wherein the target microbial agent or organism comprises at least one selected from the group consisting of *Listeria* spp., *Listeria monocytogenes*, *Salmonella* spp., *Escherichia coli* O157:H7, coliforms and fecal coliforms.

21. The method of claim 1, wherein the target microbial agent or organism comprises a spoilage organism.

22. The method of claim 1, wherein removing portions of each enriched separate test lot sample comprises removing equal volume portions of each enriched separate test lot sample.

23. The method of claim 1, wherein testing of the modular composite sample, using a suitable detection assay comprises use of at least one of a DNA-based method, an immunochemistry-based method, and a biosensor-based method.

24. The method of claim 1, wherein the separate test lots are production lots of a meat or poultry product, comprising an assemblage of one or more meat or poultry specimens, respectively.

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25. The method of claim 1, wherein the separate test lots are separate production lots of a fish or seafood product, comprising an assemblage of one or more fish or seafood specimens, respectively.

26. The method of claim 1, wherein the separate test lots are separate production lots of a ready-to-eat product.

27. The method of claim 2, wherein product specimens are synonymous with product portions.

28. The method of claim 4, wherein the medium comprises a selective agent that will inhibit a competing non-target microbial agent or organism.

29. The method of claim 5 wherein the concentration step comprises at least one of immunomagnetic bead separation, and affinity chromatography.

30. The method of claim 6, wherein the more sensitive protocol further comprises a concentration step to concentrate the microbial agent or organism, in combination with the same test protocol that is used to test the modular composite sample.

31. The method of claim 17, wherein removing portions in step d) is removing equal portions, aseptically, so as to preclude contamination of the enriched separate single-unit production lot samples.

32. The method of claim 24, wherein the meat or poultry specimens are meat trim pieces or poultry trim pieces, respectively.

33. The method of claim 24, wherein the meat is that of beef, pork, sheep or bison.

* * * * *

EXHIBIT B

US007534584C1

(12) **INTER PARTES REEXAMINATION CERTIFICATE** (1596th)**United States Patent****Samadpour**(10) **Number:** **US 7,534,584 C1**(45) **Certificate Issued:** **Mar. 6, 2019**

(54) **MODULAR COMPOSITING-MULTIPLE LOT SCREENING PROTOCOLS FOR DETECTION OF PATHOGENS, MICROBIAL CONTAMINANTS AND/OR CONSTITUENTS**

(75) **Inventor:** **Mansour Samadpour**, Seattle, WA (US)

(73) **Assignee:** **INSTITUTE FOR ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH, INC.**, Lake Forest Park, WA (US)

Reexamination Request:

No. 95/001,294, Apr. 5, 2010

Reexamination Certificate for:

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Filed: **Aug. 8, 2005**

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(60) Provisional application No. 60/599,473, filed on Aug. 6, 2004.

(51) **Int. Cl.**
C12Q 1/24 (2006.01)
C12Q 1/10 (2006.01)
C12Q 1/18 (2006.01)
C12Q 1/04 (2006.01)
G01N 1/28 (2006.01)

(52) **U.S. Cl.**
CPC **C12Q 1/10** (2013.01); **C12Q 1/04** (2013.01); **C12Q 1/18** (2013.01); **C12Q 1/24** (2013.01); **G01N 1/28** (2013.01); **Y10S 435/849** (2013.01)

(58) **Field of Classification Search**

None

See application file for complete search history.

(56) **References Cited**

To view the complete listing of prior art documents cited during the proceeding for Reexamination Control Number 95/001,294, please refer to the USPTO's public Patent Application Information Retrieval (PAIR) system under the Display References tab.

Primary Examiner — Sharon Turner

(57) **ABSTRACT**

Particular aspects provide a method of sampling, testing and validating test lots (e.g., single-unit production lots), comprising: assembling a plurality of product portions from each of a plurality of test lots and combining the collected product portions to provide a corresponding set of test lot samples (wherein each test lot sample is attributed to a particular corresponding test lot); enriching the set of test lot samples; removing equal portions of each enriched sample, and combining the removed portions to provide a modular composite sample; and testing of the modular composite sample for the target agent/organism, wherein where such testing is positive, individual test lots may nonetheless yet be validated by further testing of a respective enriched test lot sample and obtaining a negative test result. The methods have broad utility for monitoring all sort of test lots (e.g., environmental lots, production lots, pharmaceutical lots, etc.) and for efficiently affecting informed, targeted remedial measures.

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INTER PARTES
REEXAMINATION CERTIFICATE

THE PATENT IS HEREBY AMENDED AS
INDICATED BELOW.

Matter enclosed in heavy brackets [] appeared in the patent, but has been deleted and is no longer a part of the patent; matter printed in *italics* indicates additions made to the patent.

AS A RESULT OF REEXAMINATION, IT HAS BEEN DETERMINED THAT:

Claims 24-25 are cancelled.

Claims 1, 2, 17 and 32-33 are determined to be patentable as amended.

Claims 3-16, 18-23 and 26-31, dependent on an amended claim, are determined to be patentable.

1. A method of sampling, testing and validating a plurality of operationally-linked test lots of beef for [microbial contamination] release into commerce, comprising:

- a) collecting a plurality of portions from each of a plurality of separate operationally-linked test lots of beef, each to be validated for release into commerce, the test lots each comprising an assemblage of one or more specimens from which the portions are collected, wherein each test lot is separately sampled [by taking said plurality of portions thereof] to conform to a statistical-based sampling plan specifying, for a particular microbial agent or organism, a number of portions to be taken sufficient to provide for validation and release of the test lot into commerce;
- b) combining the collected conforming plurality of portions corresponding to each of the separate test lots to provide a corresponding set of separate test lot samples, wherein each separate test lot sample is attributed to a particular corresponding separate test lot;
- c) incubating the set of separate test lot samples under conditions suitable to allow levels of a target microbial agent or organism that is present in one or more of the separate test lot samples to reach detectable levels and become uniform, or substantially uniform, throughout the respective one or more separate test lot samples, to provide a set of separate test lot samples enriched for the target microbial agent or organism;
- d) removing portions of each enriched separate test lot sample, and combining the removed portions to provide a modular composite sample; and
- e) testing of the modular composite sample, using a suitable detection assay, for the target microbial agent or organism, wherein when such testing is negative all of said separate test [lot samples] lots are validated for release into commerce, and wherein when such testing is positive, each of the individual separate test lots are validated for release into commerce, according to the statistical-based sampling plan, by further testing of a portion of the respective enriched separate test lot sample using the same or a more sensitive protocol and obtaining a negative test result for each test lot, wherein the enrichment in step c), prior to removing portions in step d), is sufficient to enable said validation of indi-

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vidual separate test lots with no requirement for further enrichment thereof, and with no requirement for further sampling in a).

2. The method of claim 1, wherein each of the test [lot] lots is a single-unit production lot, comprised of operationally-linked product specimens.

17. A method of sampling, testing and validating a plurality of operationally-linked test lots of meat or poultry for [microbial contamination] release into commerce, comprising:

- a) collecting a plurality of portions from each of a plurality of operationally-linked single-unit production lots of meat or poultry, the single-unit production lots each comprising an assemblage of one or more production specimens from which the portions are collected, wherein each single-unit production lot is separately sampled [by taking said plurality of portions thereof] to conform to a statistical-based sampling plan specifying, for a particular microbial agent or organism, a number of portions to be taken sufficient to provide for validation and release of the single-unit production lot into commerce;
 - b) combining the collected conforming plurality of product portions corresponding to each of the separate single-unit production lots to provide a corresponding set of separate single-unit production lot samples, wherein each separate single-unit production lot sample is attributed to a particular corresponding separate single-unit production lot;
 - c) incubating the set of separate single-unit production lot samples under conditions suitable to allow levels of a target microbial agent or organism that is present in one or more of the separate single-unit production lot samples to reach detectable levels and become uniform, or substantially uniform, throughout the respective one or more separate single-unit production lot samples, to provide a set of separate single-unit production lot samples enriched for the target microbial agent or organism;
 - d) removing portions of each enriched separate single-unit production lot sample, and combining the removed portions to provide a modular composite sample; and
 - e) testing of the modular composite sample, using a suitable detection assay, for the target microbial agent or organism, wherein when such testing is negative all of said separate single-unit production lot samples are validated for release into commerce, and wherein when such testing is positive, individual separate single-unit production lots are validated for release into commerce, according to the statistical-based sampling plan, by further testing of a portion of the respective enriched separate single-unit production lot sample using the same or a more sensitive protocol and obtaining a negative test result for each single-unit production lot, wherein the enrichment in step c), prior to removing portions in step d), is sufficient to enable said validation of individual separate single-unit production lots with no requirement for further enrichment thereof, and with no requirement for further sampling in a).
32. The method of claim [24] 1, wherein the [meat or poultry] beef specimens are meat trim pieces [or poultry trim pieces, respectively].
33. The method of claim [24] 17, wherein the meat is that of beef, pork, sheep or bison.

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EXHIBIT C

US008822143B2

(12) **United States Patent**
Samadpour

(10) **Patent No.:** **US 8,822,143 B2**
(45) **Date of Patent:** ***Sep. 2, 2014**

(54) **MODULAR COMPOSITING-MULTIPLE LOT SCREENING PROTOCOLS FOR DETECTION OF PATHOGENS, MICROBIAL CONTAMINANTS AND/OR CONSTITUENTS**

(71) Applicant: **Institute for Environmental Health, Inc.**, Lake Forest Park, WA (US)

(72) Inventor: **Mansour Samadpour**, Seattle, WA (US)

(73) Assignee: **Institute for Environmental Health, Inc.**, Lake Forest Park, WA (US)

(*) Notice: Subject to any disclaimer, the term of this patent is extended or adjusted under 35 U.S.C. 154(b) by 0 days.

This patent is subject to a terminal disclaimer.

(21) Appl. No.: **13/784,606**

(22) Filed: **Mar. 4, 2013**

(65) **Prior Publication Data**

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Related U.S. Application Data

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(60) Provisional application No. 60/599,473, filed on Aug. 6, 2004.

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C12Q 1/24 (2006.01)
C12Q 1/04 (2006.01)
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G01N 33/535 (2006.01)
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G01N 1/28 (2006.01)
C12Q 1/00 (2006.01)
C12Q 1/06 (2006.01)
C12Q 1/08 (2006.01)
G01N 33/53 (2006.01)
G01N 33/573 (2006.01)

(52) **U.S. Cl.**

CPC .. **G01N 1/28** (2013.01); **C12Q 1/18** (2013.01);
C12Q 1/04 (2013.01); **Y10S 435/849** (2013.01)
USPC **435/4**; 435/6.15; 435/7.1; 435/30;
435/849

(58) **Field of Classification Search**

USPC 435/4, 6.15, 7.1, 30
See application file for complete search history.

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Primary Examiner — Jon P Weber

Assistant Examiner — Kailash C Srivastava

(74) *Attorney, Agent, or Firm* — Barry L. Davison; Davis Wright Tremaine LLP

(57) **ABSTRACT**

Particular aspects provide a method of sampling, testing and validating test lots (e.g., single-unit production lots), comprising: assembling a plurality of product portions from each of a plurality of test lots and combining the collected product portions to provide a corresponding set of test lot samples (wherein each test lot sample is attributed to a particular corresponding test lot); enriching the set of test lot samples; removing equal portions of each enriched sample, and combining the removed portions to provide a modular composite sample; and testing of the modular composite sample for the target agent/organism, wherein where such testing is positive, individual test lots may nonetheless yet be validated by further testing of a respective enriched test lot sample and obtaining a negative test result. The methods have broad utility for monitoring all sorts of test lots (e.g., environmental lots, production lots, pharmaceutical lots, etc.) and for efficiently affecting informed, targeted remedial measures.

38 Claims, No Drawings

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MODULAR COMPOSITING-MULTIPLE LOT SCREENING PROTOCOLS FOR DETECTION OF PATHOGENS, MICROBIAL CONTAMINANTS AND/OR CONSTITUENTS

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

The present application is a continuation of U.S. Provisional patent application Ser. No. 12/360,796, filed 27 Jan. 2009 (issuing as U.S. Pat. No. 8,389,233 on 5 Mar. 2013) and entitled MODULAR COMPOSITING-MULTIPLE LOT SCREENING PROTOCOLS FOR DETECTION OF PATHOGENS, MICROBIAL CONTAMINANTS AND/OR CONSTITUENTS, which is a continuation of U.S. Provisional patent application Ser. No. 11/199,871, filed 8 Aug. 2005 (Now U.S. Pat. No. 7,534,584) and entitled MODULAR COMPOSITING-MULTIPLE LOT SCREENING PROTOCOLS FOR DETECTION OF PATHOGENS, MICROBIAL CONTAMINANTS AND/OR CONSTITUENTS, which claims the benefit of priority to U.S. Provisional Patent Application Ser. No. 60/599,473, filed 6 Aug. 2004 and entitled MODULAR WET COMPOSITING-MULTIPLE LOT SCREENING PROTOCOLS FOR DETECTION OF PATHOGENS, all which are incorporated by reference herein in their entirety.

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

Aspects of the present invention relate generally to improving the efficiency of producing food and health related (e.g., pharmaceutical) products, and the safety and quality thereof. Particular embodiments relate to novel methods for microbial pathogen testing that allow for enhanced sensitivity, cost savings and traceability (e.g., source tracking) for remedial purposes. The methods are broadly applicable to many product areas including, but not limited to beef, pork, sheep, bison, deer, elk, poultry (e.g., chicken and turkey) and fish and other seafood, produce, juices, dairy products, dry goods (e.g., cereals, nuts, etc.), fruits and vegetables, herbs and spices, and all manners of raw and processed foods, environmental samples (e.g., water, wastewater, soil, surface samples, air samples taken by impingers and filtration, etc.), pharmaceuticals, and other types of samples to be analyzed using micro-organism enrichment-detection protocols.

BACKGROUND

Manufacturers and respective regulatory agencies strive to continually improve the safety and the quality of foods, pharmaceuticals, nutraceuticals, water and the environment. Under recent United States Department of Agriculture, Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) directives and guidelines, many food producers in the United States have adopted sampling plans that involve testing, for example, of raw beef trims and/or ground beef for *E. coli* O157:H7, and ready-to-eat products for *Listeria monocytogenes* and/or *Salmonella*. Similar trends are observed in other countries, for products detained for domestic consumption and/or export. For example, the pharmaceutical industry spends considerable resources on sterility testing and environmental monitoring, and the water and wastewater industry and their respective regulatory agencies allocate considerable resources to monitor the quality of water (e.g., drinking, recreational and fisheries resources), wastewater (treated and untreated) and sludge (biosolids). Concern for the quality of air has resulted in monitoring of indoor air for the presence of microbial

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contaminants and pathogens. These sampling plans associated with such testing determine, for example, the disposition of products and the production lots, or result in decisions regarding the safety of water, receiving waters and recreational waters, and the impact of wastewater discharge, and quality of air.

The operative art with respect to such product “hold and release” monitoring efforts comprises various different sampling plans, typically pursuant to International Commission on Microbial Specifications for Food (ICMSF) guidelines for testing food products, FDA and USDA or EPA guidelines, or intuitive sampling plans. The common feature of these sampling plans is that several samples representing production lots, or a number of environmental samples, are combined into a combined production lot prior to sampling. For example, a typical plan for microbial pathogen detection calls for taking more than one sample, for instance ten (10) to sixty (60) sample pieces from a given sample lot (combined production lot), to form a composite sample for testing. The number of pieces taken to form the composite sample depends, under ICMSF or other regulatory guidelines, on the outcome of infection/poisoning (e.g., the severity), the level of hazards, and potential increase in the hazard levels due to storage. The same holds true in detecting microbial constituents and/or spoilage organisms. With respect to *E. coli* O157 testing, for example, a typical plan calls for taking 60 samples (e.g., sample pieces) from a production lot to form a single composite sample. With respect to *Listeria monocytogenes*, thirty (30) samples are typically taken from a production lot to form a composite sample. With respect to sterility testing, a typical plan may call for compositing 10-100 units of the product, and in the case of environmental sampling, 2-10 samples are often composited. Generally, the number of samples that are composited reflects: the overall sensitivity of the test method and the limit of detection that applies to the test unit; the ability to concentrate/enrich the composite sample to achieve the desired sensitivity; and the cost of sampling compared with the cost of analysis.

The costs associated with testing food are substantial, and consequently manufacturer’s often resort to increasing the size of the “production lot” to be tested. For instance, the standard size production lot for trim testing for *E. coli* O157 in the U.S. beef industry is five (5) ‘combos’ (each combo weighing approximately 2,000 pounds), and for *Listeria* and *Salmonella* in ready-to-eat (RTE) products, it is one composite sample per production line per shift. A primary problem associated with the use of large size test lots is that a large quantity of products must be downgraded or destroyed when there is a positive finding of a pathogen. Additionally, because of the nature of combination ‘lotting’ (combining, for purposes of forming the test lot, several independent sub-lots that collectively span a long period of production time), it is very difficult to investigate the cause of the failure and pinpoint the source/cause, and remedial measures cannot be effectively taken. Furthermore, compositing a large number of samples may result in reduced sensitivity for the test unit and adversely effect the limit of detection.

Typically, once a composite sample is constructed (following the art with respect to particular testing) it is then enriched for the presence of a given pathogen/microbe by addition of appropriate amounts of enrichment media and incubation at an appropriate temperature for a given amount of time. If the pathogen/microbe is present, then it grows and multiplies under the favorable conditions of enrichment, thereby providing more material which can be detected by subsequent analysis. The composite sample is then tested by one or more available, art recognized methods including, for example,

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enrichment followed by immunoassay-based tests or PCR-based methods, or culturing of the organism of interest, or other DNA- or immunochemical-based methods.

The above-described prior art has several substantial deficiencies. First, even though the prior art production lot encompasses several production sublots (for instance 5 combo/pallets of products, or an entire shift of production), if a positive finding is obtained for the production lot (composite test sample), the entire production lot is rejected (all 5 combos/pallets, or one shift of production) and diverted to economically undesirable end uses (e.g., cooking or disposal), even though the pathogen of concern may be confined to only a limited portion of the production sublots (corresponding to one or two combos/pallets or an hour of production) comprising the production lot.

Second, the current art does not allow for retesting of any production sublots, primarily because microbial contaminants are unevenly spread throughout the products, and in many instances the levels of contamination are minute and may be present on very small portions of the products in each subplot. Therefore, once a composite sample is constructed if it tests positive all of the sublots are destroyed. The regulatory agencies do not allow for re-testing of the sublots, premised on the argument that after a production lot tests positive, negative test results obtained for production sublots, or even a new production lot composite sample, are meaningless since the microbial contaminants are not uniformly present throughout the products.

Third, the current protocols for collecting a composite sample representing a production lot often group together production sublots that are unrelated by virtue of product type or hours of production. This makes investigating the nature of the failure a difficult task even when relevant information is available. As an example, information is frequently available on a 'per combo' basis including (but not limited to) hour of production, vendor source of raw materials, production employees present, and operational status of microbial intervention process steps. However, when five unrelated combos/pallets are included in a production lot it is much harder to rationally analyze the available information since there is no way to determine which combo(s) contained the pathogen (as stated above, prior art re-sampling is not a viable option since it may not yield the same result). Likewise, for sterility testing, when the composite sample tests positive, the entire production will be disposed.

Therefore, there is a pronounced need in the art to implement novel and effective testing protocols that provide a greater measure of assurance that the food product is safe, that provide economic relief to the producer, and that allow for effective tracking of the contaminated lot(s) for remedial purposes (e.g., pinpointing the time of the contamination and determine the segment of production which was impacted).

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

Aspects of the present invention provide novel enrichment, testing and detection methods for detection of pathogens or other microbes in, for example, food, water, wastewater, industrial, pharmaceutical, botanical, environmental samples and other types of samples analyzed by detection methods (e.g., enrichment-detection methods). According to particular aspects, where any microbiological testing program involves compositing a number of samples to form a test lot, independent enrichment of each of the components of the composite sample is performed with subsequent formation of a modular (e.g., wet modula) composite sample by combining portions from each independent enrichment, which allows for

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determining the outcome of the test for each individual sub-unit of the composite as opposed to generalizing the results of the test sample to all of its' subunits. This individual outcome determination is achieved by retesting the individual enrichment samples in the event that the composite enrichment tests positive.

In preferred aspects, a reportable lot is defined as a single unit of a modular (e.g., modular wet) composite lot, rather than as an entire composite lot comprised of multiple sublots. For example, a reportable production lot is defined as a single unit of production and corresponds to a single unit of a modular wet composite production lot, rather than (as in the prior art) as an entire composite lot comprised of multiple production units (multiple sublots). With respect to testing each reportable lot (e.g., each single unit of production), a plurality of pieces/portions of sample are separately collected from each single reportable lot (e.g., from each single production unit; individual test unit) and composited to form, for example, one 'single-unit production lot sample' (corresponding, in each case, to a particular single unit of production), which is enriched using appropriate enrichment protocols to allow for the levels of the target organism to reach detection levels and uniformity of presence in the enriched sample. Multiple aliquots of the enrichment media may be removed for analysis, thus circumventing the prior art problem of having to re-sample a test production lot where microbial contaminants are not uniformly present throughout the product.

In the exemplary context of enriched single units of production, equal portions of enrichment buffer are removed (aseptically) from each single-unit production lot sample and combined to form a Modular Wet Composite Sample (MWCS). The MWCS is then tested using an appropriate test (detection assay) for the target agent (e.g., target organism). If a negative result is obtained from the MWCS, then all of the individual single-unit production lots are released. Significantly, if a positive result is obtained from a MWCS, the enrichment buffers from each of the individual single-unit production lot samples are separately (individually) tested, using the same test protocol, or a test protocol with enhanced sensitivity, or any appropriate test protocol. According to particular preferred aspects, the signal obtained from a MWCS is due to one or more of its' components (e.g., reportable lots (e.g., individually enriched single production units)), and it is, therefore, possible in all cases to trace a positive signal to one or more individual subunits by testing each individual enrichment sample for the same target. When a positive finding is obtained for any individual reportable lot sample (e.g., single-unit production lot sample), that particular reportable lot (e.g., single-unit production lot) is deemed to be positive, and appropriate actions are taken based on the result. In the case of pathogen/microbial testing for foods, the individual positive sublots can be diverted to cooking, disposal, or other acceptably safe endpoint. The rest of the individually enriched test units that test negative are deemed to be negative and will be reported as such (are validated).

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

Particular aspects provide novel enrichment, testing and validation methods for detection of pathogens or other microbes in any type of samples (e.g., food production lots, water, wastewater, industrial, pharmaceutical, botanical, environmental samples, etc.) analyzable by enrichment-detection methods. In preferred aspects, a test lot (single-unit production lot), rather than (as in the prior art) a composite lot comprised of multiple test lots (e.g., single-unit production

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lot units), is defined and established as the single unit of production. A plurality of portions (e.g., product portions) are separately collected from each test lot (e.g., single-unit production lot) and composited to form a corresponding set of test lot samples (e.g., single-unit production lot samples), which are enriched using suitable enrichment protocols to allow target agents/organisms to reach detectable levels and sample uniformity. In particular embodiments, equal portions of enrichment buffer are removed (preferably aseptically) from the enriched samples, and combined to form a modular composite sample (e.g., modular wet composite sample; MWCS). The MWCS, for example, is tested using a suitable detection assay for the target agent/organism. If a negative result is obtained from the MWCS, then all of the individual single-unit production lots are validated and releasable. If a positive result is obtained from a MWCS, the enrichment sample corresponding to individual test lots (e.g., individual single-unit production lots) are separately (individually) tested, using the same, or a more sensitive test protocol. If a positive finding is obtained for any test lot sample (e.g., individual single-unit production lot sample), that particular respective lot is diverted to cooking, disposal, or other acceptably safe endpoint. If a negative finding is obtained for any individual test lot sample (e.g., single-unit production lot sample), then that particular lot is validated and releasable. In this manner, any member lot of the MWCS that tests negative using the same method (about 5-fold more sensitive relative to the prior art), or an enhanced method (about fifty times more sensitive), will be validated and releasable for consumption.

DEFINITIONS

The term “test lot” or “reportable lot” as used herein to refer to an assemblage of one or more specimens of a medium or process (e.g., assemblage of specimens of air, water, solids, or of products of a production process, etc.), where such assemblage can be sampled by taking portions of the one or more specimens thereof, and where the one or more specimens of the assemblage are operationally linked in a manner (e.g., proximity, time, process step, etc.) whereby information derived about sampled portions is operationally applicable to all specimens of the assemblage, and thus to the test lot. In particular instances, portions are synonymous with specimens.

The term “single production unit” or “single-unit production lot” as used herein is a form of test lot, and refers to a single unit of production (e.g., for beef trim a “combo,” or for almonds a “bin”) rather than, as in the prior art, to a composite comprised of multiple, non-operationally linked single production units (production sublots).

The term “product portion” as used herein refers to a product piece (e.g., a piece of solid beef trim, etc.), aliquot of product (e.g., a volume of liquid juice) or weight of product (e.g., a weight of semi-solid pudding). A single unit of production is composed of multiple product portions. In preferred embodiments, the number of product portions which comprise a single unit of production is great enough that removal of some product portions to form a sample does not impose an unacceptable economic loss to the producer. In particular instances, a product portion may be a specimen of a test lot as defined above.

The term “compositing” as used herein refers to combining a number of single product portions to form one larger sample. In preferred embodiments, the number and selection of single product portions to be combined conform to statistical-based sampling plans which seek to form a typical or

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average sample that is representative of the test lot (e.g., single production unit) being sampled.

The term “test lot sample” or “single-unit production lot sample” or “single production unit lot sample,” as used herein refers to a sample formed by combining multiple product portions from a test lot (e.g., single production unit), such that each test sample (e.g., each single-unit production lot sample) is attributed to a particular corresponding test lot (e.g., production unit). For production lot samples, the number of portions/pieces combined may be essentially any number, but preferably is selected so as to conform to statistical-based sampling plans. Preferably the number of pieces combined is selected from the range group consisting of from about 5 to about 100, from about 10 to about 90, from about 20 to about 80, from about 30 to about 70, from about 30 to about 60, and from about 40 to about 50 product portions. Preferably, the number of independent product portions is selected so as to yield a sample size that is equal to or greater than that required by the subsequent analysis to be applied.

The term “enrichment” as used herein refers to incubating a test lot sample (e.g., single-unit production lot sample) under conditions suitable to allow levels of a target agent/organism that is present to reach detectable levels and become uniform or substantially uniform throughout the enriched test lot sample (e.g., single-unit production lot sample). Preferably, enrichment comprises addition of an amount of an enrichment medium or buffer to a sample, and incubating the sample at a favorable temperature for a period of time sufficient to allow the organism to grow and multiply.

The term “enrichment medium” as used herein refers to a mixture which contains nutrients and which has properties (e.g., pH and/or oxygen content) which favor the growth of the target agent/organism. Preferably, the enrichment medium is formulated to mimic the environment of the target agent/organism or take advantage of a known metabolic property of the target agent/organism. Preferably, the enrichment medium will omit nutrients needed by competing undesired agents/organisms. Preferably, the enrichment medium will include selective agents that will inhibit competing undesired agents/organisms. An example of an enrichment medium is that used for the isolation of nitrogen fixing bacteria (those that can use nitrogen gas as their sole nitrogen source) contains no source of fixed nitrogen in the medium. A second example is an enrichment medium for the isolation of bacteria capable of utilizing 2,4-dichlorophenoxyacetic acid (also known as 2,4-D, a common herbicide) as a source of carbon and energy. The enrichment medium is formulated to contain benzoate as the only organic compound.

The term “wet enrichment” as used herein refers to diluting a solid, semisolid or liquid single-unit production lot sample (single production unit lot sample) with enrichment medium in a ratio of approximately 1:10 (wt./v), consistent with conventional methods for expanding and testing a variety of target agents/organisms as set forth in widely recognized published methods. For example, the conventional method for expanding and testing for coliforms, fecal coliforms and *E. Coli* in food, comprises a 1:10 dilution of the samples (e.g., 50 g into 450 ml) (see, e.g., U.S. FDA Bacteriology Analytical Manual Online, Chapter 4 and 4A, describing standard 1:10 dilution procedures for testing of coliforms, fecal coliforms and *E. Coli* in food, shellfish and juices).

The term “dry enrichment” as used herein refers to enriching a solid, semisolid or liquid single unit production lot sample either with no addition of other compounds if the sample’s intrinsic properties (water activity, nutrients and pH) are sufficient/proper to promote the growth of the target

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agent/organism, or by dilution of the sample with minimal amounts of enrichment medium in ratios ranging from about 0.1 (wt/v) to about 1 (wt/v).

The term “modular composite sample” as used herein refers to a sample formed by removing, preferably aseptically, equal portions of each of a plurality of enriched single-unit production lot samples, and combining the removed portions.

The phrase “suitable detection assay” as used herein refers to any assay that is suitable for detecting a particular agent/organism. Preferably, the assay is optimized to detect the particular agent/organism, and may be combined with one or more concentration steps for concentration of the agent/organism being assayed.

The term “validation” as used herein with respect to production lots refers to determining that a particular sample tests negative using the detection assay. Where a modular composite sample tests negative, all single-unit production lot samples comprising the composite sample are validated along with the respective single-unit production lots, which are thus cleared for release. Where a modular composite sample tests positive, individual single unit production lots may nonetheless yet be validated if particular respective single-unit production lot samples test negative.

“Trim” refers to small pieces of meat and fat which are excised during, for example, the beef fabrication process in order to produce primal and subprimal pieces and marketable cuts.

“Trim testing” refers to the process of testing trim, or raw materials which are to be used for ground meat production for microbial/pathogen content.

A “combo” or “combo-bin” refers, in the beef industry, to the single production unit packaging unit. Alternatively raw materials corresponding to a single production unit to be tested can be packaged into boxes, bags or other appropriate containers, which can be placed, for example, on pallets.

A “composite lot-unit” or “five-combo-lot unit” refers to a composite unit, comprised of five combos (combo-bins). In prior art sampling plans, the composite lot-unit represents the raw material (composite trim) upon which sampling, testing and acceptance or rejection is based.

Therefore, according to particular aspects, a test lot (or test unit) (e.g., a single-unit production lot or single production unit lot) is defined and taken as one or more operationally-linked specimens of a medium or process. A test lot may be a single unit of production (e.g., a single combo, bin, pallet, or segment of production, etc.), or a single environmental sample (e.g., single air sample, single water and wastewater sample, etc.), rather than, as in the prior art, as a composite of multiple production units or environmental samples.

In preferred embodiments, a number of pieces or portions of sample are collected from a test lot (e.g., from a single production unit (e.g., from the single combo, bin, pallet, or segment of production, etc.), and composited to form one ‘single-unit test sample’ (or ‘single-unit production lot sample.’ In particular embodiments (e.g., wet enrichment), enrichment buffer is added to the sample. In alternate embodiments, ‘dry enrichment’ (as defined herein above) is done.

Significantly, in the inventive modular (e.g., wet modular) compositing method, samples taken from each unit of production are enriched separately using appropriate enrichment protocols to allow for the levels of the target organism to reach detection levels and uniformity of presence in the enriched sample. In preferred aspects, such enrichment obviates the prior art problem of having microbial contaminants that are not uniformly present throughout the product sample. Specifically, while microbes are not necessarily uniformly dis-

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tributed in food, water, air, pharmaceuticals, etc., after enriching a sample as described herein, the target microbes are uniformly, or as least substantially uniformly, present in the enrichment medium or extract from dry or semi dried enrichments.

Following incubation for the target organism, equal portions of enrichment buffer or sample are removed (aseptically) from each of several test lot samples (e.g., from several single-unit production lot samples; preferably 5) and pulled together to form a Modular Wet Composite Sample (MWCS). The MWCS is then tested using an appropriate test (detection assay) for the target organism. If a negative result is obtained from the MWCS, then all of the individual single unit production Lots are released.

If a positive result is obtained from a MWCS, the enrichment buffers from each of the individual single unit production lot samples are then separately (individually) tested, using the same test protocol, or any other appropriate tests. Alternately, an augmented protocol that uses a concentration step for the target organism, such as immunomagnetic bead separation, affinity chromatography, etc., followed by an appropriate detection method is used to test the enriched individual test lot samples (e.g., the individual single-unit production lot samples).

In preferred aspects, the inventive methods of analysis are modified by introducing a concentration step (e.g., employing antibody-coated paramagnetic beads into the procedure (e.g., DNA-based detection, biosensor based detection, classical microbiological detections, etc)). Antibody-coated paramagnetic beads, for example, afford an approximately 10-fold increase in sensitivity. This concentration step, combined with the fact that the individual test lot samples (e.g., individual single-unit production lot samples) are not 5-fold diluted relative to the MWCS, allows for an overall 50-fold increase in sensitivity relative to prior art sampling and testing protocols. If a lateral flow device is used for detection, such immunomagnetic concentration may or may not be used, in which case the detection sensitivity is increased by about 5-fold.

Where a positive finding (test result) is obtained for any individual test lot sample (e.g., single-unit production lot sample), that particular corresponding test lot (e.g., single-unit production lot) is deemed to be positive, and appropriate decisions are then made on the positive results (e.g., in the case of food products, diversion to cooking, disposal, or other acceptably safe endpoint). For each of the rest of the test lot samples (e.g., single-unit production lot samples) belonging to the positive MWCS, where a negative finding is obtained, that particular test lot sample (e.g., that single-unit production lot sample) is deemed to be negative. In this manner, any test lot (e.g., any single-unit production lot) that is a member of the group of test lots (e.g., single-unit production lots) that comprise a corresponding MWCS, will be considered to be negative, if it tests negative using the same method (about 5-fold more sensitive relative to the prior art), or the enhanced method (about fifty times more sensitive).

In alternate preferred embodiments, a new Modular Wet Composite Sample is reconstructed from the member lots (test lots) that have tested negative, and subjected to a third layer of testing to again show (confirm) that they are negative. Specifically if one of the five individual test lots (e.g., individual single-unit production lots) has tested positive (and the other four negative), and the protocols call for testing of composites consisting of five test lots, a new single test lot sample can formed from a new test lot, and can be used along with the four negative samples to form a new MWCS.

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The methods of the present invention provide substantial economic savings to the food and pharmaceutical industries, because of the precision in detecting in the context of operationally-linked portions of production (e.g., test lots; single production units; single-unit production lots) which are contaminated. The inventive methods prevent unnecessary destruction of negative lots that are condemned because of guilt by association (e.g., simply because they were grouped with a contaminated composite prior art multiple production unit lot in a prior art testing protocol). Where a positive finding is obtained, a smaller quantity of material is diverted to an economically undesirable end use. The proposed invention has substantial utility (e.g., bringing savings, accuracy and precision in pinpointing problems) in the environmental industry.

Additionally, and significantly, it is easier to trace the source of the contamination and apply remedial measures, because the single-unit test component points, for example, to single point of production or a single sampling site.

Particular Preferred Aspects:

Particular aspect provide a method of sampling, testing and validating test lots, comprising: separately collecting a plurality of portions from each of a plurality of test lots, the test lots each comprising an assemblage of one or more operationally-linked specimens, wherein the assemblage can be sampled by taking portions thereof; combining the collected portions corresponding to each of the test lots to provide a corresponding set of test lot samples, wherein each test lot sample is attributed to a particular corresponding test lot; incubating the set of test lot samples under conditions suitable to allow levels of a target agent or organism that is present in one or more of the samples to reach detectable levels and become uniform, or substantially uniform, throughout the respective one or more samples, to provide a set of enriched test lot samples; removing, aseptically, equal portions of each enriched test lot sample, and combining the removed portions to provide a modular composite sample; and testing of the modular composite sample, using a suitable detection assay, for the target agent or organism, wherein where such testing is negative all test lot samples are validated, and wherein where such testing is positive, individual test lots may nonetheless yet be validated by further testing of a portion of the respective enriched test lot sample using the same or a more sensitive protocol and obtaining a negative test result.

In particular aspects, the test lot is selected from the group consisting of an environmental lot comprising one or more operationally-linked environmental specimens, pharmaceutical lot comprising one or more operationally-linked pharmaceutical specimens, single-unit product lot comprising one or more operationally-linked product specimens, and combinations thereof. In particular aspects, the test lot is a single-unit production lot, comprised of operationally-linked product specimens. In particular aspects, product specimens are synonymous with product portions. In particular aspects, the methods further comprise incubating the modular composite sample prior to testing it. In particular aspects, incubating each test lot sample comprises adding an amount of enrichment medium to the sample, and removing enriched sample portions comprises removing a portion of the enrichment medium from each enriched sample and combining the removed portions to provide a modular composite sample. In particular aspects, testing of the modular composite sample, using a suitable detection assay comprises use of a concentration step to concentrate the microbial agent or organism.

In particular aspects, where testing of the modular composite sample is positive, and wherein the individual test lots are further tested, such further testing comprises use of the

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more sensitive protocol. Preferably, the more sensitive protocol comprises use of a concentration step to concentrate the microbial agent or organism, in combination with the same test protocol used to test the modular composite sample.

In particular aspects, the methods further comprise forming an additional modular composite sample from the enriched test lot samples and testing the additional modular composite sample, using the same or a different suitable assay, to confirm the testing status. In particular aspects, the methods further comprise forming an additional modular composite sample from an additional enriched test lot sample along with any enriched test lot samples that test negative, and testing the additional modular composite sample, using the same or a different suitable assay. In particular aspects, the methods further comprise, where testing of the modular composite sample is negative, forming an additional modular composite sample from the enriched test lot samples, and testing the additional modular composite sample, using a different suitable assay, to confirm the negative testing status.

In particular aspects, the test lot is selected from the lot group consisting of a single combo, single bin, single pallet, and a segment of production. Preferably, the number of test lots is from about 3 to about 10, about 5 to about 8, or about 5.

In particular aspects, the methods further comprise, where testing of the modular composite sample is positive, determining which individual test lots are positive, and application of remedial measures that are specific to one or more individual test lots that test positive. In particular aspects, separately collecting a plurality of portions from each of a plurality of test lots comprises separately collecting from each test lot a number of portions selected from the group consisting of from about 5 to about 100, from about 10 to about 90, from about 20 to about 80, from about 30 to about 70, from about 30 to about 60, and from about 40 to about 50 portions. Preferably, separately collecting a plurality of portions from each of a plurality of test lots comprises separately collecting from each test lot about 30 to about 60 portions. Alternatively, separately collecting a plurality of portions from each of a plurality of test lots comprises separately collecting from each test lot about 30 portions. Preferably, separately collecting a plurality of portions from each of a plurality of test lots comprises separately collecting from each test lot about 60 portions.

Particular aspects provide a method of sampling, testing and validating test lots, comprising: separately collecting a plurality of portions from each of a plurality of single-unit production lots, the single-unit production lots each comprising an assemblage of one or more product specimens, wherein the assemblage can be sampled by taking portions thereof; combining the collected product portions corresponding to each of the single-unit production lots to provide a corresponding set of single-unit production lot samples, wherein each single-unit production lot sample is attributed to a particular corresponding single-unit production lot; incubating the set of single-unit production lot samples under conditions suitable to allow levels of a target agent or organism that is present in one or more of the single-unit production lot samples to reach detectable levels and become uniform, or substantially uniform, throughout the respective one or more samples, to provide a set of enriched single-unit production lot samples; removing, aseptically, equal portions of each enriched single-unit production lot sample, and combining the removed portions to provide a modular composite sample; and testing of the modular composite sample, using a suitable detection assay, for the target agent or organism, wherein where such testing is negative all single-unit production lot

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samples are validated, and wherein where such testing is positive, individual single-unit production lots may nonetheless yet be validated by further testing of a portion of the respective enriched single-unit production lot sample using the same or a more sensitive protocol and obtaining a negative test result.

The following Examples are exemplary are not intended, and should not be construed to limit the scope of the aspects of the present conception that are claimed hereunder.

EXAMPLE I

The Present Inventive Methods were Shown to Provide a Substantial Economic Advantage, while Providing for Enhanced Safety, and Implementation of Remedial Measures

At present, the standard size 'production lot' for trim testing for *E. coli* O157 in the beef industry in the USA is a combination of five combos, where each combo represents a single production unit and weighs approximately 2,000 pounds. An inventive modular composite sample method, and in particular a Modular Wet Composite Sample (MWCS) method was implemented at a United States beef producer. TABLE 1 shows, according particular aspects, the result of testing 62,919 MWCS samples, and then retesting the individual single-unit production lot (combo) samples whenever a positive result was obtained from the MWCS sample.

TABLE 1 shows that out of 62,919 MWCS samples, a total of 217 yielded a positive testing result for *E. coli* O157. Using prior art protocols, all of the single-unit production lots that comprised the 217 positive samples would go to rendering or be downgraded for cooking. As each MWCS represents five single-unit production lots of 2,000 lbs each, this would represent approximately 2,710,000 pounds of product (i.e., $217 \times 5 \times 2,000$ pounds = 2,710,000 pounds).

Specifically, the individual single-unit production lot samples comprising the MWCS were analyzed separately following each positive MWCS result. As can be seen in TABLE 1, only 391 individual single-unit production lot samples yielded a positive result out of the cumulative total of 1,085 individual single-unit production lot samples comprising the MWCS samples which yielded a positive result. If only the 391 individual single-unit production lots yielding a positive sample result were diverted to rendering or downgraded for cooking this would represent 782,000 lbs of product. The remaining 694 individual single-unit production lots, corresponding to 1,928,000 lbs of product, are, according to preferred aspects of the present invention, validated and releasable into the chain of commerce.

The product, in this Example I, being produced by this U.S. beef producer was beef trim. The release of the validated 19,280,000 lbs of beef trim into commerce using the present invention, instead of diverting or downgrading the product, trim, represents a cost savings to the producer of about \$2,500,000, relative to prior art methods. Additionally, the testing of the single-unit production lots by augmented testing protocols (representing a 5- to 50-fold increase in sensitivity relative to the MWCS testing) provides substantial additional assurance of the safety of the food products.

Furthermore, as outlined above under "BACKGROUND," information is frequently available on a 'per combo' basis including, but not limited to hour of production, vendor source of raw materials, production employees present, and operational status of microbial intervention process steps. However, when five unrelated combos are included in a combined 'production lot' (as in the prior art) it is much harder to

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rationally analyze the available information since there is no way to determine which combo(s) contained the pathogen (as stated above, prior art re-sampling is not a viable option since it may not yield the same result).

By contrast, in this Example I and according to preferred aspects of the present invention, any combo-specific information including, but not limited to hour of production, vendor source of raw materials, production employees present, and operational status of microbial intervention process steps can be brought to bear in the context of the 391 individual single-unit production lots yielding a positive sample result, thereby providing an effective means not only to trace contamination, but also to affect remedial measures in view thereof.

TABLE 1

Results of modular wet composite sampling of 62,919 multiple lots and number of Individual Production Unit Lot (IPUL) which tested positive when MWCS tested positive

Location	Total # Analyses	# Positives	#				
			1 IPUL	2 IPULs	3 IPULs	4 IPULs	5 IPULs
Est. A, B, C.	62,919	271	180	39	18	11	7

EXAMPLE II

According to Particular Aspects of the Present Invention, the Inventive Sampling Methods have Substantial Utility in the Context of Ready-to-Eat (RTE) Products (e.g., Meat and Poultry Products)

Under United States Department of Agriculture, Food Safety and Inspection Service (USDA FSIS) guidelines, producers of Ready-to-Eat (RTE) meat and poultry products may adapt an 'end product' sampling program as verification that their product is free of the pathogen *Listeria monocytogenes*. The frequency of end product sampling is selected by the producer/establishment, based on valid sampling statistics. Typically, samples are collected at random times over a production shift (e.g., from 'cleanup to cleanup'), and from several product lines. The samples are combined to form a composite sample, and enrichment buffer is added to the composite sample to allow *Listeria* spp. or *L. monocytogenes* to grow and multiply under the favorable conditions of enrichment, thereby providing more material that can be detected by subsequent analysis.

According to particular aspects of the present invention the producer of RTE meat or poultry products collects samples from individual single-unit production lots. Preferably, the producer defines and produces these single-unit lots in such a fashion as to maximize the information available for investigating the nature of a failure. For example, possible definitions of an individual single-unit production lot include, but are limited to all of the product produced by a particular production line (or produced by a particular production line in a particular period of time), a volume of product such as a pallet of packed boxes produced on a particular production line, or a production area in the plant, etc.

Individual single-unit production lot samples are collected, to which, in wet enrichment embodiments, enrichment medium/buffer is added. Following incubation under conditions suitable to allow levels of a target agent or organism that is present to reach detectable levels and become uniform or substantially uniform throughout the respective sample(s),

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aliquots of the enrichment medium/buffers from individual single-unit production lot samples are combined to form a MWCS. The MWCS is then analyzed for the presence or absence of, for example, *Listeria* spp. or *L. monocytogenes*. In the event that a positive result is obtained for the MWCS, enrichment medium/buffer sample from the individual single-unit production lot samples comprising that MWCS is analyzed using the same, or augmented testing protocols.

Individual single-unit production lots for which the enrichment medium/buffer from the corresponding sample yields a positive result are diverted to cooking, disposal or other safety endpoint. Individual single-unit production lots for which the enrichment medium/buffer from the corresponding sample yields a negative result are released into commerce. The latter fraction represents a direct cost savings to the producer relative to a prior art approaches where a 'production lot' is defined to include multiple single-unit production lots (e.g., multiple product lines and an extended period of time ('cleanup to cleanup')).

Furthermore, by defining and establishing the individual single-unit production lots in such a fashion as to maximize the information available for investigating the nature of a failure, the producer is able to narrow the scope of investigation and apply remediative resources more effectively and efficiently. For example, where a positive result(s) is associated with one or more specific production lines, targeted aggressive sanitation is used to resolve the problem. Alternatively, for example, where a positive result(s) is associated with one or more specific products, determining whether raw materials are contaminated, or whether process microbial intervention steps were operating properly are effectively and efficiently used.

EXAMPLE III

According to Particular Aspects of the Present Invention, the Inventive Sampling Methods have Substantial Utility for Providing Cost-Effective and Effective Monitoring Means for Pathogen Levels in Nut Products (e.g., Almond Products) and the Like

A large number of almond products may be produced by using one or more processes including slivering, scalding, blanching, slicing, roasting, and dicing. Anti-microbial treatments may also be applied, such as use of propylene oxide. In practice, these processes may be used in many various combinations, and the output from one process may be the input for another. This makes it very difficult to trace finished product all the way back to raw materials.

As indicated by a recent outbreak, almond products are susceptible to contamination by *Salmonella* spp. According to additional aspects, the present inventive methods provide a cost-effective means of implementing an effective monitoring program for pathogen levels in nut products (e.g., almond products). In such embodiments, final almond products of each type are collected at random times over a production shift. The producer defines and establishes individual single-unit production lots as the amount of product produced during a production shift (from 'cleanup to cleanup'), or as some smaller production unit (e.g., a 'truckload'), provided that one sample was collected from each such single-unit production lot. The single-unit production lot samples are combined to form a corresponding composite sample, and, in wet enrichment embodiments, enrichment medium/buffer is added to the composite sample to allow *Salmonella* spp. to grow and multiply under the favorable conditions of enrich-

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ment (as described herein above), thereby providing more material that can be detected by subsequent analysis.

Aliquots of the enrichment medium/buffers from individual single-unit production lot samples are combined to form a MWCS. The MWCS are analyzed for the presence or absence, for example, of *Salmonella* spp. Where a positive result is obtained for the MWCS, each enrichment buffer from the individual single-unit production lot samples comprising that MWCS is analyzed using the same, or augmented testing protocols.

Individual single-unit production lots for which the enrichment buffer from the corresponding sample yields a positive result are returned for application of additional microbial intervention steps (e.g., roasting), or are diverted to a safe endpoint (e.g., a cooked product). Individual single-unit production lots for which the enrichment buffer from the corresponding sample yields a negative result are thereby validated and are releasable into commerce. The latter fraction represents a direct cost savings to the producer relative to prior art approaches where effective testing is not done, and discovery of contamination with a pathogen leads to large scale recalls of product.

Furthermore, by defining and establishing the individual production single-unit production lots in such a fashion as to maximize the information available for investigating the nature of a failure, the producer is able to narrow the scope of investigation and apply remediative resources more effectively and efficiently. For example, the processes used to produce the almond product(s) yielding positive result(s) are rationally analyzed, and associations between the pathogen contamination and one or more of the processes of slivering, scalding, blanching, slicing, roasting, and dicing are determined, and targeted effective and efficient remedial measures are applied.

EXAMPLE IV

According to Particular Aspects of the Present Invention, the Inventive Sampling Methods have Substantial Utility in the Context of Contaminants that Enter a Production Line at a Given Time Point, and then Clear

Sterility testing of food and pharmaceuticals, or purity testing of fermentation processes often involves compositing a number of samples to form a composite test lot. Detection of microbial contamination in the composite sample, as discussed in detail herein above, results in rejection of the whole production. Practically speaking, often a pinpoint contaminant enters production at a given time point, and then clears within a few minutes. Aspects of the present invention allow for identifying the time of entry, and informed elimination of products (operationally linked test lots) flanking the contamination event.

EXAMPLE V

According to Particular Aspects of the Present Invention, the Inventive Sampling Methods have Substantial Utility in the Context of Environmental Monitoring (e.g., with Samples of Water, Wastewater, Sludge, Soil, Surface Sponges, Surface Swabs, Condensates, Air or Liquids)

In the context of environmental monitoring, when several samples (water, wastewater, sludge, soil, surface sponges, surface swabs, condensates, air or liquids) are composited

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and subjected to enrichment, followed by testing to detect environmental contamination, the current invention allows for pinpointing the test lots (e.g., operationally-linked unit(s)) that are positive for the microbe of concern.

The invention claimed is:

1. A method of sampling and testing for microbes in multiple separate test lots, comprising:

- a) separately collecting multiple independent samples from each of multiple separate test lots, wherein each separate test lot is separately sampled by taking said multiple independent samples thereof;
- b) separately compositing the collected multiple independent samples from each of the separate test lots to provide a corresponding set of separate composited test lot samples, wherein each of the separate composited test lot samples is attributed to a particular corresponding separate test lot;
- c) enriching each of the separate composited test of samples to provide a set of separate composited test lot samples enriched for the target microbe(s);
- d) removing portions of each separate enriched composited test lot sample, and combining the removed portions to provide a pooled modular composite sample; and
- e) testing of the pooled modular composite sample, using a suitable detection assay, for the target microbe(s), wherein when such testing is negative all of said samples that were composited to form the separate composited test lot samples are deemed negative for the target microbe(s) and each of the multiple separate test lots is validated, and wherein when such testing is positive, each of the individual separate composited test lot samples that were used to form the pooled modular composite sample are individually tested to determine which of the separate composited test lot samples is positive for the target microbe(s), wherein the test lots corresponding to any negatively testing composited test lot samples are validated.

2. The method of claim 1, wherein each of the multiple separate test lots is selected from the group consisting of an environmental lot comprising multiple operationally-linked environmental specimens, pharmaceutical lot comprising multiple operationally-linked pharmaceutical specimens, single-unit product lot comprising multiple operationally-linked product specimens, and combinations thereof.

3. The method of claim 1, wherein each of the multiple separate test lots is a single-unit production lot, comprised of operationally-linked product specimens.

4. The method of claim 1, further comprising incubating the pooled modular composite sample of d), prior to testing in e).

5. The method of claim 1, wherein enriching each separate composited test lot sample in c) comprises incubating each separate composited test lot sample with enrichment medium suitable to enrich for the target microbe(s), and wherein removing in d) comprises removing a portion of the enrichment medium from each enriched separate composited test lot sample and combining the removed portions to provide a pooled modular composite sample.

6. The method of claim 1, wherein testing of the pooled modular composite sample, using a suitable detection assay comprises use of a concentration step to concentrate the target microbe(s).

7. The method of claim 1, wherein where testing in e) of the pooled modular composite sample is positive, and wherein the separate individual composited test lot samples are further tested using a more sensitive protocol.

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8. The method of claim 1, further comprising, forming an additional pooled modular composite sample from the set of enriched separate composited test lot samples of c) and testing the additional pooled modular composite sample, using the same or a different suitable assay, to confirm the testing status.

9. The method of claim 1, further comprising, forming an additional pooled modular composite sample from an additional enriched separate composited test lot sample along with any enriched separate composited test lot samples of c) that test negative in e), and testing the additional pooled modular composite sample, using the same or a different suitable assay.

10. The method of claim 1, further comprising, where testing of the pooled modular composite sample in e) is negative, forming an additional pooled modular composite sample from the set of enriched separate composited test lot samples of c), and testing the additional pooled modular composite sample, using a different suitable assay, to confirm the negative testing status.

11. The method of claim 1, wherein each the test lots is selected from the lot group consisting of a single combo, single bin, single pallet, and a production assemblage.

12. The method of claim 1, wherein the number of separate test lots is from 3 to 10.

13. The method of claim 1, further comprising, where testing of the pooled modular composite sample is positive, determining which individual separate test lots are positive, application of remedial measures to said separate positive test lots, and validating by further testing of the respective remediated separate test lots and obtaining a negative test result.

14. The method of claim 1, wherein, in a), separately collecting said multiple independent samples from each of the multiple separate test lots comprises separately collecting from each separate test lot a number of samples from 5 to 100.

15. The method of claim 1, wherein, in a), separately collecting said multiple independent samples from each of the multiple separate test lots comprises separately collecting 30 to 60 samples from each separate test lot.

16. The method of claim 1, wherein, in a), separately collecting said multiple independent samples from each of the multiple separate test lots comprises separately collecting at least 30 samples from each separate test lot.

17. The method of claim 1, wherein, in a), separately collecting said multiple independent samples from each of the multiple separate test lots comprises separately collecting at least 60 samples from each separate test lot.

18. The method of claim 1, wherein removing portions in step d) is removing equal portions, aseptically, so as to preclude contamination of the enriched separate composited test lot samples.

19. The method of claim 1, wherein the target microbe(s) comprises at least one selected from the group consisting of *Listeria*, *Salmonella* and *Escherichia coli*.

20. The method of claim 1, wherein the target microbe(s) comprises at least one selected from the group consisting of *Listeria* spp., *Listeria monocytogenes*, *Salmonella* spp., *Escherichia coli* O157:H7, coliforms and fecal coliforms.

21. The method of claim 1, wherein the target microbe(s) comprises a spoilage organism.

22. The method of claim 1, wherein removing portions of each separate enriched composited test lot sample comprises removing equal volume portions of each separate enriched composited test lot sample.

23. The method of claim 1, wherein testing of the pooled modular composite sample, using a suitable detection assay

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comprises use of at least one of a DNA-based method, an immunochemistry-based method, and a biosensor-based method.

24. The method of claim 1, wherein each of the multiple separate test lots are production lots of a meat or poultry product, comprising an assemblage of one or more meat or poultry specimens, respectively.

25. The method of claim 1, wherein each of the multiple separate test lots are separate production lots of a fish or seafood product, comprising an assemblage of one or more fish or seafood specimens, respectively.

26. The method of claim 1, wherein each of the multiple separate test lots are separate production lots of a ready-to-eat product.

27. The method of claim 1, further comprising in (e) wherein when such testing of the modular composite sample is negative, nonetheless testing each of the separate composited test lot samples for the target microbe(s) to enhance confidence in the negative testing results prior to deeming the test lots validated or releasable into the chain of commerce.

28. The method of claim 1, further comprising, in (e) wherein when such testing of the pooled modular composite sample is positive, each of the individual separate composited test lot samples that were used to form the pooled modular composite sample are individually tested to determine which of the separate composited test lot samples is positive for the target microbe(s), retesting of the separate negatively testing composited test lot samples to enhance confidence in the negative testing results prior to deeming the test lots corresponding to the negatively testing composited test lot samples validated or releasable into the chain of commerce.

29. The method of claim 3, wherein product specimens are synonymous with product portions.

30. The method of claim 5, wherein the enrichment medium comprises a selective agent that will inhibit a competing non-target microbe.

31. The method of claim 6 wherein the concentration step comprises at least one of immunomagnetic bead separation, and affinity chromatography.

32. The method of claim 7, wherein the more sensitive protocol comprises use of a concentration step to concentrate the target microbe(s), in combination with the same test protocol used to test the pooled modular composite sample.

33. The method of claim 24, wherein the meat or poultry specimens are meat trim pieces or poultry trim pieces, respectively.

34. The method of claim 24, wherein the meat is that of beef, pork, sheep or bison.

35. A method of sampling, and testing for microbe(s) in multiple separate test lots, comprising:

- a) separately collecting multiple independent samples from each of multiple separate single-unit production lots, wherein each separate single-unit production lot is separately sampled by taking said multiple independent samples thereof;
- b) separately compositing the collected multiple independent samples from each of the separate test lots to pro-

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vide a corresponding set of separate composited single-unit production lot samples, wherein each of the separate composited single-unit production lot samples is attributed to a particular corresponding separate single-unit production lot;

- c) enriching of the separate composited single-unit production lot samples to provide a set of separate composited single-unit production lot samples enriched for the target microbe(s);
- d) removing portions of each separate enriched composited single-unit production lot sample, and combining the removed portions to provide a pooled modular composite sample; and
- e) testing of the pooled modular composite sample, using a suitable detection assay, for the target microbe(s), wherein when such testing is negative all of said samples that were composited to form the separate composited single-unit production lot samples are deemed negative for the target microbe(s) and each of the multiple separate single-unit production lots is validated, and wherein when such testing is positive, each of the individual separate composited single-unit production lot samples that were used to form the pooled modular composite sample are individually tested to determine which of the separate composited single-unit production lot samples is positive for the target microbe(s), wherein the single-unit production lots corresponding to any negatively testing composited single-unit production lot samples are validated.

36. The method of claim 35, wherein removing portions in step d) is removing equal portions, aseptically, so as to preclude contamination of the enriched separate composited single-unit production lot samples.

37. The method of claim 35, further comprising in (e) wherein when such testing of the pooled modular composite sample is negative, nonetheless testing each of the separate composited single-unit production lot samples for the target microbe(s) to enhance confidence in the negative testing results prior to deeming the single-unit production lots validated or releasable for processing or into the chain of commerce.

38. The method of claim 35, further comprising, in (e) wherein when such testing of the modular composite sample is positive, each of the individual separate composited single-unit production lot samples that were used to form the pooled modular composite sample are individually tested to determine which of the separate composited single-unit production lot samples is positive for the target microbe(s), retesting of the separate negatively testing composited single-unit production lot samples to enhance confidence in the negative testing results prior to deeming the single-unit production lots corresponding to the negatively testing composited single-unit production lot samples validated or releasable into the chain of commerce.

* * * * *

EXHIBIT D

UNITED STATES PATENT AND TRADEMARK OFFICE
CERTIFICATE OF CORRECTION

Page 1 of 1

PATENT NO. : 8,822,143 B2
APPLICATION NO. : 13/784606
DATED : September 2, 2014
INVENTOR(S) : Mansour Samadpour

It is certified that error appears in the above-identified patent and that said Letters Patent is hereby corrected as shown below:

In the Claims

Claim 1, Col. 15, line 19:

“c) enriching each of the separate composited test of samples”

Should read as:

“c) enriching each of the separate composited test lot samples”



Signed and Sealed this
Twenty-fifth Day of August, 2015

Michelle K. Lee

Michelle K. Lee
Director of the United States Patent and Trademark Office

EXHIBIT E



US009637771B2

(12) **United States Patent**
Samadpour

(10) **Patent No.:** **US 9,637,771 B2**
(45) **Date of Patent:** ***May 2, 2017**

(54) **MODULAR COMPOSITING-MULTIPLE LOT SCREENING PROTOCOLS FOR DETECTION OF PATHOGENS, MICROBIAL CONTAMINANTS AND/OR CONSTITUENTS**

(71) Applicant: **Institute for Environmental Health, Inc.**, Lake Forest Park, WA (US)

(72) Inventor: **Mansour Samadpour**, Lake Forest Park, WA (US)

(73) Assignee: **Institute for Environmental Health, Inc.**, Lake Forest Park, WA (US)

(*) Notice: Subject to any disclaimer, the term of this patent is extended or adjusted under 35 U.S.C. 154(b) by 163 days.

This patent is subject to a terminal disclaimer.

(21) Appl. No.: **14/472,144**

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Related U.S. Application Data

(63) Continuation of application No. 13/784,606, filed on Mar. 4, 2013, now Pat. No. 8,822,143, which is a continuation of application No. 12/360,796, filed on Jan. 27, 2009, now Pat. No. 8,389,233, which is a continuation of application No. 11/199,871, filed on Aug. 8, 2005, now Pat. No. 7,534,584.

(60) Provisional application No. 60/599,473, filed on Aug. 6, 2004.

(51) **Int. Cl.**

C12Q 1/06 (2006.01)

C12Q 1/08 (2006.01)

C12Q 1/10 (2006.01)

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C12Q 1/20 (2006.01)

C12Q 1/22 (2006.01)

C12Q 1/24 (2006.01)

C12Q 1/04 (2006.01)

C12Q 1/18 (2006.01)

G01N 1/28 (2006.01)

C12Q 1/00 (2006.01)

G01N 33/53 (2006.01)

G01N 33/573 (2006.01)

G01N 33/533 (2006.01)

C12M 1/00 (2006.01)

(52) **U.S. Cl.**

CPC **C12Q 1/10** (2013.01); **C12Q 1/04** (2013.01); **C12Q 1/18** (2013.01); **C12Q 1/24** (2013.01); **G01N 1/28** (2013.01); **Y10S 435/849** (2013.01)

(58) **Field of Classification Search**

None

See application file for complete search history.

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Primary Examiner — Debbie K Ware

Assistant Examiner — Kailash C Srivastava

(74) Attorney, Agent, or Firm — Barry L. Davison; Davis Wright Tremaine LLP

(57) **ABSTRACT**

Particular aspects provide a method of sampling, testing and validating test lots (e.g., single-unit production lots), comprising: assembling a plurality of product portions from each of a plurality of test lots and combining the collected product portions to provide a corresponding set of test lot samples (wherein each test lot sample is attributed to a particular corresponding test lot); enriching the set of test lot samples; removing equal portions of each enriched sample, and combining the removed portions to provide a modular composite sample; and testing of the modular composite sample for the target agent/organism, wherein where such testing is positive, individual test lots may nonetheless yet be validated by further testing of a respective enriched test lot sample and obtaining a negative test result. The methods have broad utility for monitoring all sorts of test lots (e.g., environmental lots, production lots, pharmaceutical lots, etc.) and for efficiently affecting informed, targeted remedial measures.

49 Claims, No Drawings

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MODULAR COMPOSITING-MULTIPLE LOT SCREENING PROTOCOLS FOR DETECTION OF PATHOGENS, MICROBIAL CONTAMINANTS AND/OR CONSTITUENTS

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

The present application is a continuation of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 13/784,606, filed 4 Mar. 2013 and entitled MODULAR COMPOSITING-MULTIPLE LOT SCREENING PROTOCOLS FOR DETECTION OF PATHOGENS, MICROBIAL CONTAMINANTS AND/OR CONSTITUENTS (issuing as U.S. Pat. No. 8,822,143 on 2 Sep. 2014), which is a continuation of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 12/360,796, filed 27 Jan. 2009 and entitled MODULAR COMPOSITING-MULTIPLE LOT SCREENING PROTOCOLS FOR DETECTION OF PATHOGENS, MICROBIAL CONTAMINANTS AND/OR CONSTITUENTS (issued as U.S. Pat. No. 8,389,233 on 5 Mar. 2013), which is a continuation of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 11/199,871, filed 8 Aug. 2005 (issued as U.S. Pat. No. 7,534,584) and entitled MODULAR COMPOSITING-MULTIPLE LOT SCREENING PROTOCOLS FOR DETECTION OF PATHOGENS, MICROBIAL CONTAMINANTS AND/OR CONSTITUENTS, which claims the benefit of priority to U.S. Provisional Patent Application Ser. No. 60/599,473, filed 6 Aug. 2004 and entitled MODULAR WET COMPOSITING-MULTIPLE LOT SCREENING PROTOCOLS FOR DETECTION OF PATHOGENS, all which are incorporated by reference herein in their entirety.

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

Aspects of the present invention relate generally to improving the efficiency of producing food and health related (e.g., pharmaceutical) products, and the safety and quality thereof. Particular embodiments relate to novel methods for microbial pathogen testing that allow for enhanced sensitivity, cost savings and traceability (e.g., source tracking) for remedial purposes. The methods are broadly applicable to many product areas including, but not limited to beef, pork, sheep, bison, deer, elk, poultry (e.g., chicken and turkey) and fish and other seafood, produce, juices, dairy products, dry goods (e.g., cereals, nuts, etc.), fruits and vegetables, herbs and spices, and all manners of raw and processed foods, environmental samples (e.g., water, wastewater, soil, surface samples, air samples taken by impingers and filtration, etc.), pharmaceuticals, and other types of samples to be analyzed using microorganism enrichment-detection protocols.

BACKGROUND

Manufacturers and respective regulatory agencies strive to continually improve the safety and the quality of foods, pharmaceuticals, nutraceuticals, water and the environment. Under recent United States Department of Agriculture, Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) directives and guidelines, many food producers in the United States have adopted sampling plans that involve testing, for example, of raw beef trims and/or ground beef for *E. coli* O157:H7, and ready-to-eat products for *Listeria monocytogenes* and/or *Salmonella*. Similar trends are observed in other countries, for products detained for domestic consumption and/or export. For example, the pharmaceutical

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industry spends considerable resources on sterility testing and environmental monitoring, and the water and wastewater industry and their respective regulatory agencies allocate considerable resources to monitor the quality of water (e.g., drinking, recreational and fisheries resources), wastewater (treated and untreated) and sludge (biosolids). Concern for the quality of air has resulted in monitoring of indoor air for the presence of microbial contaminants and pathogens. These sampling plans associated with such testing determine, for example, the disposition of products and the production lots, or result in decisions regarding the safety of water, receiving waters and recreational waters, and the impact of wastewater discharge, and quality of air.

The operative art with respect to such product “hold and release” monitoring efforts comprises various different sampling plans, typically pursuant to International Commission on Microbial Specifications for Food (ICMSF) guidelines for testing food products, FDA and USDA or EPA guidelines, or intuitive sampling plans. The common feature of these sampling plans is that several samples representing production lots, or a number of environmental samples, are combined into a combined production lot prior to sampling. For example, a typical plan for microbial pathogen detection calls for taking more than one sample, for instance ten (10) to sixty (60) sample pieces from a given sample lot (combined production lot), to form a composite sample for testing. The number of pieces taken to form the composite sample depends, under ICMSF or other regulatory guidelines, on the outcome of infection/poisoning (e.g., the severity), the level of hazards, and potential increase in the hazard levels due to storage. The same holds true in detecting microbial constituents and/or spoilage organisms. With respect to *E. coli* O157 testing, for example, a typical plan calls for taking 60 samples (e.g., sample pieces) from a production lot to form a single composite sample. With respect to *Listeria monocytogenes*, thirty (30) samples are typically taken from a production lot to form a composite sample. With respect to sterility testing, a typical plan may call for compositing 10-100 units of the product, and in the case of environmental sampling, 2-10 samples are often composited. Generally, the number of samples that are composited reflects: the overall sensitivity of the test method and the limit of detection that applies to the test unit; the ability to concentrate/enrich the composite sample to achieve the desired sensitivity; and the cost of sampling compared with the cost of analysis.

The costs associated with testing food are substantial, and consequently manufacturer’s often resort to increasing the size of the “production lot” to be tested. For instance, the standard size production lot for trim testing for *E. coli* O157 in the U.S. beef industry is five (5) “combos” (each combo weighing approximately 2,000 pounds), and for *Listeria* and *Salmonella* in ready-to-eat (RTE) products, it is one composite sample per production line per shift. A primary problem associated with the use of large size test lots is that a large quantity of products must be downgraded or destroyed when there is a positive finding of a pathogen. Additionally, because of the nature of combination ‘lotting’ (combining, for purposes of forming the test lot, several independent sub-lots that collectively span a long period of production time), it is very difficult to investigate the cause of the failure and pinpoint the source/cause, and remedial measures cannot be effectively taken. Furthermore, compositing a large number of samples may result in reduced sensitivity for the test unit and adversely effect the limit of detection.

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Typically, once a composite sample is constructed (following the art with respect to particular testing) it is then enriched for the presence of a given pathogen/microbe by addition of appropriate amounts of enrichment media and incubation at an appropriate temperature for a given amount of time. If the pathogen/microbe is present, then it grows and multiplies under the favorable conditions of enrichment, thereby providing more material which can be detected by subsequent analysis. The composite sample is then tested by one or more available, art recognized methods including, for example, enrichment followed by immunoassay-based tests or PCR-based methods, or culturing of the organism of interest, or other DNA- or immunochemical-based methods.

The above-described prior art has several substantial deficiencies. First, even though the prior art production lot encompasses several production sublots (for instance 5 combo/pallets of products, or an entire shift of production), if a positive finding is obtained for the production lot (composite test sample), the entire production lot is rejected (all 5 combos/pallets, or one shift of production) and diverted to economically undesirable end uses (e.g., cooking or disposal), even though the pathogen of concern may be confined to only a limited portion of the production sublots (corresponding to one or two combos/pallets or an hour of production) comprising the production lot.

Second, the current art does not allow for retesting of any production sublots, primarily because microbial contaminants are unevenly spread throughout the products, and in many instances the levels of contamination are minute and may be present on very small portions of the products in each sublot. Therefore, once a composite sample is constructed if it tests positive all of the sublots are destroyed. The regulatory agencies do not allow for re-testing of the sublots, premised on the argument that after a production lot tests positive, negative test results obtained for production sublots, or even a new production lot composite sample, are meaningless since the microbial contaminants are not uniformly present throughout the products.

Third, the current protocols for collecting a composite sample representing a production lot often group together production sublots that are unrelated by virtue of product type or hours of production. This makes investigating the nature of the failure a difficult task even when relevant information is available. As an example, information is frequently available on a 'per combo' basis including (but not limited to) hour of production, vendor source of raw materials, production employees present, and operational status of microbial intervention process steps. However, when five unrelated combos/pallets are included in a production lot it is much harder to rationally analyze the available information since there is no way to determine which combo(s) contained the pathogen (as stated above, prior art re-sampling is not a viable option since it may not yield the same result). Likewise, for sterility testing, when the composite sample tests positive, the entire production will be disposed.

Therefore, there is a pronounced need in the art to implement novel and effective testing protocols that provide a greater measure of assurance that the food product is safe, that provide economic relief to the producer, and that allow for effective tracking of the contaminated lot(s) for remedial purposes (e.g., pinpointing the time of the contamination and determine the segment of production which was impacted).

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

Aspects of the present invention provide novel enrichment, testing and detection methods for detection of patho-

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gens or other microbes in, for example, food, water, wastewater, industrial, pharmaceutical, botanical, environmental samples and other types of samples analyzed by detection methods (e.g., enrichment-detection methods). According to particular aspects, where any microbiological testing program involves compositing a number of samples to form a test lot, independent enrichment of each of the components of the composite sample is performed with subsequent formation of a modular (e.g., wet modular) composite sample by combining portions from each independent enrichment, which allows for determining the outcome of the test for each individual subunit of the composite as opposed to generalizing the results of the test sample to all of its' subunits. This individual outcome determination is achieved by retesting the individual enrichment samples in the event that the composite enrichment tests positive.

In preferred aspects, a reportable lot is defined as a single unit of a modular (e.g., modular wet) composite lot, rather than as an entire composite lot comprised of multiple sublots. For example, a reportable production lot is defined as a single unit of production and corresponds to a single unit of a modular wet composite production lot, rather than (as in the prior art) as an entire composite lot comprised of multiple production units (multiple sublots). With respect to testing each reportable lot (e.g., each single unit of production), a plurality of pieces/portions of sample are separately collected from each single reportable lot (e.g., from each single production unit; individual test unit) and composited to form, for example, one 'single-unit production lot sample' (corresponding, in each case, to a particular single unit of production), which is enriched using appropriate enrichment protocols to allow for the levels of the target organism to reach detection levels and uniformity of presence in the enriched sample. Multiple aliquots of the enrichment media may be removed for analysis, thus circumventing the prior art problem of having to re-sample a test production lot where microbial contaminants are not uniformly present throughout the product.

In the exemplary context of enriched single units of production, equal portions of enrichment buffer are removed (aseptically) from each single-unit production lot sample and combined to form a Modular Wet Composite Sample (MWCS). The MWCS is then tested using an appropriate test (detection assay) for the target agent (e.g., target organism). If a negative result is obtained from the MWCS, then all of the individual single-unit production lots are released. Significantly, if a positive result is obtained from a MWCS, the enrichment buffers from each of the individual single-unit production lot samples are separately (individually) tested, using the same test protocol, or a test protocol with enhanced sensitivity, or any appropriate test protocol. According to particular preferred aspects, the signal obtained from a MWCS is due to one or more of its' components (e.g., reportable lots (e.g., individually enriched single production units)), and it is, therefore, possible in all cases to trace a positive signal to one or more individual subunits by testing each individual enrichment sample for the same target. When a positive finding is obtained for any individual reportable lot sample (e.g., single-unit production lot sample), that particular reportable lot (e.g., single-unit production lot) is deemed to be positive, and appropriate actions are taken based on the result. In the case of pathogen/microbial testing for foods, the individual positive sublots can be diverted to cooking, disposal, or other acceptably safe endpoint. The rest of the individually enriched test units that test negative are deemed to be negative and will be reported as such (are validated).

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DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE
INVENTION

Particular aspects provide novel enrichment, testing and validation methods for detection of pathogens or other microbes in any type of samples (e.g., food production lots, water, wastewater, industrial, pharmaceutical, botanical, environmental samples, etc.) analyzable by enrichment-detection methods. In preferred aspects, a test lot (single-unit production lot), rather than (as in the prior art) a composite lot comprised of multiple test lots (e.g., single-unit production lot units), is defined and established as the single unit of production. A plurality of portions (e.g., product portions) are separately collected from each test lot (e.g., single-unit production lot) and composited to form a corresponding set of test lot samples (e.g., single-unit production lot samples), which are enriched using suitable enrichment protocols to allow target agents/organisms to reach detectable levels and sample uniformity. In particular embodiments, equal portions of enrichment buffer are removed (preferably aseptically) from the enriched samples, and combined to form a modular composite sample (e.g., modular wet composite sample; MWCS). The MWCS, for example, is tested using a suitable detection assay for the target agent/organism. If a negative result is obtained from the MWCS, then all of the individual single-unit production lots are validated and releasable. If a positive result is obtained from a MWCS, the enrichment sample corresponding to individual test lots (e.g., individual single-unit production lots) are separately (individually) tested, using the same, or a more sensitive test protocol. If a positive finding is obtained for any test lot sample (e.g., individual single-unit production lot sample), that particular respective lot is diverted to cooking, disposal, or other acceptably safe endpoint. If a negative finding is obtained for any individual test lot sample (e.g., single-unit production lot sample), then that particular lot is validated and releasable. In this manner, any member lot of the MWCS that tests negative using the same method (about 5-fold more sensitive relative to the prior art), or an enhanced method (about fifty times more sensitive), will be validated and releasable for consumption.

Definitions

The term “test lot” or “reportable lot” as used herein to refer to an assemblage of one or more specimens of a medium or process (e.g., assemblage of specimens of air, water, solids, or of products of a production process, etc.), where such assemblage can be sampled by taking portions of the one or more specimens thereof, and where the one or more specimens of the assemblage are operationally linked in a manner (e.g., proximity, time, process step, etc.) whereby information derived about sampled portions is operationally applicable to all specimens of the assemblage, and thus to the test lot. In particular instances, portions are synonymous with specimens.

The term “single production unit” or “single-unit production lot” as used herein is a form of test lot, and refers to a single unit of production (e.g., for beef trim a “combo,” or for almonds a “bin”) rather than, as in the prior art, to a composite comprised of multiple, non-operationally linked single production units (production sublots).

The term “product portion” as used herein refers to a product piece (e.g., a piece of solid beef trim, etc.), aliquot of product (e.g., a volume of liquid juice) or weight of product (e.g., a weight of semi-solid pudding). A single unit of production is composed of multiple product portions. In preferred embodiments, the number of product portions which comprise a single unit of production is great enough

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that removal of some product portions to form a sample does not impose an unacceptable economic loss to the producer. In particular instances, a product portion may be a specimen of a test lot as defined above.

The term “compositing” as used herein refers to combining a number of single product portions to form one larger sample. In preferred embodiments, the number and selection of single product portions to be combined conform to statistical-based sampling plans which seek to form a typical or average sample that is representative of the test lot (e.g., single production unit) being sampled.

The term “test lot sample” or “single-unit production lot sample” or “single production unit lot sample,” as used herein refers to a sample formed by combining multiple product portions from a test lot (e.g., single production unit), such that each test sample (e.g., each single-unit production lot sample) is attributed to a particular corresponding test lot (e.g., production unit). For production lot samples, the number of portions/pieces combined may be essentially any number, but preferably is selected so as to conform to statistical-based sampling plans. Preferably the number of pieces combined is selected from the range group consisting of from about 5 to about 100, from about 10 to about 90, from about 20 to about 80, from about 30 to about 70, from about 30 to about 60, and from about 40 to about 50 product portions. Preferably, the number of independent product portions is selected so as to yield a sample size that is equal to or greater than that required by the subsequent analysis to be applied.

The term “enrichment” as used herein refers to incubating a test lot sample (e.g., single-unit production lot sample) under conditions suitable to allow levels of a target agent/organism that is present to reach detectable levels and become uniform or substantially uniform throughout the enriched test lot sample (e.g., single-unit production lot sample). Preferably, enrichment comprises addition of an amount of an enrichment medium or buffer to a sample, and incubating the sample at a favorable temperature for a period of time sufficient to allow the organism to grow and multiply.

The term “enrichment medium” as used herein refers to a mixture which contains nutrients and which has properties (e.g., pH and/or oxygen content) which favor the growth of the target agent/organism. Preferably, the enrichment medium is formulated to mimic the environment of the target agent/organism or take advantage of a known metabolic property of the target agent/organism. Preferably, the enrichment medium will omit nutrients needed by competing undesired agents/organisms. Preferably, the enrichment medium will include selective agents that will inhibit competing undesired agents/organisms. An example of an enrichment medium is that used for the isolation of nitrogen fixing bacteria (those that can use nitrogen gas as their sole nitrogen source) contains no source of fixed nitrogen in the medium. A second example is an enrichment medium for the isolation of bacteria capable of utilizing 2,4-dichlorophenoxyacetic acid (also known as 2,4-D, a common herbicide) as a source of carbon and energy. The enrichment medium is formulated to contain benzoate as the only organic compound.

The term “wet enrichment” as used herein refers to diluting a solid, semisolid or liquid single-unit production lot sample (single production unit lot sample) with enrichment medium in a ratio of approximately 1:10 (wt./v), consistent with conventional methods for expanding and testing a variety of target agents/organisms as set forth in widely recognized published methods. For example, the

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conventional method for expanding and testing for coliforms, fecal coliforms and *E. Coli* in food, comprises a 1:10 dilution of the samples (e.g., 50 g into 450 ml) (see, e.g., U.S. FDA Bacteriology Analytical Manual Online, Chapter 4 and 4A, describing standard 1:10 dilution procedures for testing of coliforms, fecal coliforms and *E. Coli* in food, shellfish and juices).

The term “dry enrichment” as used herein refers to enriching a solid, semisolid or liquid single unit production lot sample either with no addition of other compounds if the sample’s intrinsic properties (water activity, nutrients and pH) are sufficient/proper to promote the growth of the target agent/organism, or by dilution of the sample with minimal amounts of enrichment medium in ratios ranging from about 0.1 (wt/v) to about 1 (wt/v).

The term “modular composite sample” as used herein refers to a sample formed by removing, preferably aseptically, equal portions of each of a plurality of enriched single-unit production lot samples, and combining the removed portions.

The phrase “suitable detection assay” as used herein refers to any assay that is suitable for detecting a particular agent/organism. Preferably, the assay is optimized to detect the particular agent/organism, and may be combined with one or more concentration steps for concentration of the agent/organism being assayed.

The term “validation” as used herein with respect to production lots refers to determining that a particular sample tests negative using the detection assay. Where a modular composite sample tests negative, all single-unit production lot samples comprising the composite sample are validated along with the respective single-unit production lots, which are thus cleared for release. Where a modular composite sample tests positive, individual single unit production lots may nonetheless yet be validated if particular respective single-unit production lot samples test negative.

“Trim” refers to small pieces of meat and fat which are excised during, for example, the beef fabrication process in order to produce primal and subprimal pieces and marketable cuts.

“Trim testing” refers to the process of testing trim, or raw materials which are to be used for ground meat production for microbial/pathogen content.

A “combo” or “combo-bin” refers, in the beef industry, to the single production unit packaging unit. Alternatively raw materials corresponding to a single production unit to be tested can be packaged into boxes, bags or other appropriate containers, which can be placed, for example, on pallets.

A “composite lot-unit” or “five-combo-lot unit” refers to a composite unit, comprised of five combos (combo-bins). In prior art sampling plans, the composite lot-unit represents the raw material (composite trim) upon which sampling, testing and acceptance or rejection is based.

Therefore, according to particular aspects, a test lot (or test unit) (e.g., a single-unit production lot or single production unit lot) is defined and taken as one or more operationally-linked specimens of a medium or process. A test lot may be a single unit of production (e.g., a single combo, bin, pallet, or segment of production, etc.), or a single environmental sample (e.g., single air sample, single water and wastewater sample, etc.), rather than, as in the prior art, as a composite of multiple production units or environmental samples.

In preferred embodiments, a number of pieces or portions of sample are collected from a test lot (e.g., from a single production unit (e.g., from the single combo, bin, pallet, or segment of production, etc.), and composited to form one

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‘single-unit test sample’ (or ‘single-unit production lot sample.’ In particular embodiments (e.g., wet enrichment), enrichment buffer is added to the sample. In alternate embodiments, ‘dry enrichment’ (as defined herein above) is done.

Significantly, in the inventive modular (e.g., wet modular) compositing method, samples taken from each unit of production are enriched separately using appropriate enrichment protocols to allow for the levels of the target organism to reach detection levels and uniformity of presence in the enriched sample. In preferred aspects, such enrichment obviates the prior art problem of having microbial contaminants that are not uniformly present throughout the product sample. Specifically, while microbes are not necessarily uniformly distributed in food, water, air, pharmaceuticals, etc., after enriching a sample as described herein, the target microbes are uniformly, or at least substantially uniformly, present in the enrichment medium or extract from dry or semi dried enrichments.

Following incubation for the target organism, equal portions of enrichment buffer or sample are removed (aseptically) from each of several test lot samples (e.g., from several single-unit production lot samples; preferably 5) and pulled together to form a Modular Wet Composite Sample (MWCS). The MWCS is then tested using an appropriate test (detection assay) for the target organism. If a negative result is obtained from the MWCS, then all of the individual single unit production Lots are released.

If a positive result is obtained from a MWCS, the enrichment buffers from each of the individual single unit production lot samples are then separately (individually) tested, using the same test protocol, or any other appropriate tests. Alternately, an augmented protocol that uses a concentration step for the target organism, such as immunomagnetic bead separation, affinity chromatography, etc., followed by an appropriate detection method is used to test the enriched individual test lot samples (e.g., the individual single-unit production lot samples).

In preferred aspects, the inventive methods of analysis are modified by introducing a concentration step (e.g., employing antibody-coated paramagnetic beads into the procedure (e.g., DNA-based detection, biosensor based detection, classical microbiological detections, etc)). Antibody-coated paramagnetic beads, for example, afford an approximately 10-fold increase in sensitivity. This concentration step, combined with the fact that the individual test lot samples (e.g., individual single-unit production lot samples) are not 5-fold diluted relative to the MWCS, allows for an overall 50-fold increase in sensitivity relative to prior art sampling and testing protocols. If a lateral flow device is used for detection, such immunomagnetic concentration may or may not be used, in which case the detection sensitivity is increased by about 5-fold.

Where a positive finding (test result) is obtained for any individual test lot sample (e.g., single-unit production lot sample), that particular corresponding test lot (e.g., single-unit production lot) is deemed to be positive, and appropriate decisions are then made on the positive results (e.g., in the case of food products, diversion to cooking, disposal, or other acceptably safe endpoint). For each of the rest of the test lot samples (e.g., single-unit production lot samples) belonging to the positive MWCS, where a negative finding is obtained, that particular test lot sample (e.g., that single-unit production lots sample) is deemed to be negative. In this manner, any test lot (e.g., any single-unit production lot) that is a member of the group of test lots (e.g., single-unit production lots) that comprise a corresponding MWCS, will

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be considered to be negative, if it tests negative using the same method (about 5-fold more sensitive relative to the prior art), or the enhanced method (about fifty times more sensitive).

In alternate preferred embodiments, a new Modular Wet Composite Sample is reconstructed from the member lots (test lots) that have tested negative, and subjected to a third layer of testing to again show (confirm) that they are negative. Specifically if one of the five individual test lots (e.g., individual single-unit production lots) has tested positive (and the other four negative), and the protocols call for testing of composites consisting of five test lots, a new single test lot sample can be formed from a new test lot, and can be used along with the four negative samples to form a new MWCS.

The methods of the present invention provide substantial economic savings to the food and pharmaceutical industries, because of the precision in detecting in the context of operationally-linked portions of production (e.g., test lots; single production units; single-unit production lots) which are contaminated. The inventive methods prevent unnecessary destruction of negative lots that are condemned because of guilt by association (e.g., simply because they were grouped with a contaminated composite prior art multiple production unit lot in a prior art testing protocol). Where a positive finding is obtained, a smaller quantity of material is diverted to an economically undesirable end use. The proposed invention has substantial utility (e.g., bringing savings, accuracy and precision in pinpointing problems) in the environmental industry.

Additionally, and significantly, it is easier to trace the source of the contamination and apply remedial measures, because the single-unit test component points, for example, to single point of production or a single sampling site.

Particular Preferred Aspects:

Particular aspect provide a method of sampling, testing and validating test lots, comprising: separately collecting a plurality of portions from each of a plurality of test lots, the test lots each comprising an assemblage of one or more operationally-linked specimens, wherein the assemblage can be sampled by taking portions thereof; combining the collected portions corresponding to each of the test lots to provide a corresponding set of test lot samples, wherein each test lot sample is attributed to a particular corresponding test lot; incubating the set of test lot samples under conditions suitable to allow levels of a target agent or organism that is present in one or more of the samples to reach detectable levels and become uniform, or substantially uniform, throughout the respective one or more samples, to provide a set of enriched test lot samples; removing, aseptically, equal portions of each enriched test lot sample, and combining the removed portions to provide a modular composite sample; and testing of the modular composite sample, using a suitable detection assay, for the target agent or organism, wherein where such testing is negative all test lot samples are validated, and wherein where such testing is positive, individual test lots may nonetheless yet be validated by further testing of a portion of the respective enriched test lot sample using the same or a more sensitive protocol and obtaining a negative test result.

In particular aspects, the test lot is selected from the group consisting of an environmental lot comprising one or more operationally-linked environmental specimens, pharmaceutical lot comprising one or more operationally-linked pharmaceutical specimens, single-unit product lot comprising one or more operationally-linked product specimens, and combinations thereof. In particular aspects, the test lot is a

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single-unit production lot, comprised of operationally-linked product specimens. In particular aspects, product specimens are synonymous with product portions. In particular aspects, the methods further comprise incubating the modular composite sample prior to testing it. In particular aspects, incubating each test lot sample comprises adding an amount of enrichment medium to the sample, and removing enriched sample portions comprises removing a portion of the enrichment medium from each enriched sample and combining the removed portions to provide a modular composite sample. In particular aspects, testing of the modular composite sample, using a suitable detection assay comprises use of a concentration step to concentrate the microbial agent or organism.

In particular aspects, where testing of the modular composite sample is positive, and wherein the individual test lots are further tested, such further testing comprises use of the more sensitive protocol. Preferably, the more sensitive protocol comprises use of a concentration step to concentrate the microbial agent or organism, in combination with the same test protocol used to test the modular composite sample.

In particular aspects, the methods further comprise forming an additional modular composite sample from the enriched test lot samples and testing the additional modular composite sample, using the same or a different suitable assay, to confirm the testing status. In particular aspects, the methods further comprise forming an additional modular composite sample from an additional enriched test lot sample along with any enriched test lot samples that test negative, and testing the additional modular composite sample, using the same or a different suitable assay. In particular aspects, the methods further comprise, where testing of the modular composite sample is negative, forming an additional modular composite sample from the enriched test lot samples, and testing the additional modular composite sample, using a different suitable assay, to confirm the negative testing status.

In particular aspects, the test lot is selected from the lot group consisting of a single combo, single bin, single pallet, and a segment of production. Preferably, the number of test lots is from about 3 to about 10, about 5 to about 8, or about 5.

In particular aspects, the methods further comprise, where testing of the modular composite sample is positive, determining which individual test lots are positive, and application of remedial measures that are specific to one or more individual test lots that test positive. In particular aspects, separately collecting a plurality of portions from each of a plurality of test lots comprises separately collecting from each test lot a number of portions selected from the group consisting of from about 5 to about 100, from about 10 to about 90, from about 20 to about 80, from about 30 to about 70, from about 30 to about 60, and from about 40 to about 50 portions. Preferably, separately collecting a plurality of portions from each of a plurality of test lots comprises separately collecting from each test lot about 30 to about 60 portions. Alternatively, separately collecting a plurality of portions from each of a plurality of test lots comprises separately collecting from each test lot about 30 portions. Preferably, separately collecting a plurality of portions from each of a plurality of test lots comprises separately collecting from each test lot about 60 portions.

Particular aspects provide a method of sampling, testing and validating test lots, comprising: separately collecting a plurality of portions from each of a plurality of single-unit production lots, the single-unit production lots each com-

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prising an assemblage of one or more product specimens, wherein the assemblage can be sampled by taking portions thereof; combining the collected product portions corresponding to each of the single-unit production lots to provide a corresponding set of single-unit production lot samples, wherein each single-unit production lot sample is attributed to a particular corresponding single-unit production lot; incubating the set of single-unit production lot samples under conditions suitable to allow levels of a target agent or organism that is present in one or more of the single-unit production lot samples to reach detectable levels and become uniform, or substantially uniform, throughout the respective one or more samples, to provide a set of enriched single-unit production lot samples; removing, aseptically, equal portions of each enriched single-unit production lot sample, and combining the removed portions to provide a modular composite sample; and testing of the modular composite sample, using a suitable detection assay, for the target agent or organism, wherein where such testing is negative all single-unit production lot samples are validated, and wherein where such testing is positive, individual single-unit production lots may nonetheless yet be validated by further testing of a portion of the respective enriched single-unit production lot sample using the same or a more sensitive protocol and obtaining a negative test result.

The following Examples are exemplary are not intended, and should not be construed to limit the scope of the aspects of the present conception that are claimed hereunder.

EXAMPLE I

(The Present Inventive Methods were Shown to Provide a Substantial Economic Advantage, while Providing for Enhanced Safety, and Implementation of Remedial Measures)

At present, the standard size 'production lot' for trim testing for *E. coli* O157 in the beef industry in the USA is a combination of five combos, where each combo represents a single production unit and weighs approximately 2,000 pounds. An inventive modular composite sample method, and in particular a Modular Wet Composite Sample (MWCS) method was implemented at a United States beef producer. TABLE 1 shows, according particular aspects, the result of testing 62,919 MWCS samples, and then retesting

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Specifically, the individual single-unit production lot samples comprising the MWCS were analyzed separately following each positive MWCS result. As can be seen in TABLE 1, only 391 individual single-unit production lot samples yielded a positive result out of the cumulative total of 1,085 individual single-unit production lot samples comprising the MWCS samples which yielded a positive result. If only the 391 individual single-unit production lots yielding a positive sample result were diverted to rendering or downgraded for cooking this would represent 782,000 lbs of product. The remaining 694 individual single-unit production lots, corresponding to 1,928,000 lbs of product, are, according to preferred aspects of the present invention, validated and releasable into the chain of commerce.

The product, in this Example I, being produced by this U.S. beef producer was beef trim. The release of the validated 19,280,000 lbs of beef trim into commerce using the present invention, instead of diverting or downgrading the product, trim, represents a cost savings to the producer of about \$2,500,000, relative to prior art methods. Additionally, the testing of the single-unit production lots by augmented testing protocols (representing a 5- to 50-fold increase in sensitivity relative to the MWCS testing) provides substantial additional assurance of the safety of the food products.

Furthermore, as outlined above under "BACKGROUND," information is frequently available on a 'per combo' basis including, but not limited to hour of production, vendor source of raw materials, production employees present, and operational status of microbial intervention process steps. However, when five unrelated combos are included in a combined 'production lot' (as in the prior art) it is much harder to rationally analyze the available information since there is no way to determine which combo(s) contained the pathogen (as stated above, prior art re-sampling is not a viable option since it may not yield the same result).

By contrast, in this Example I and according to preferred aspects of the present invention, any combo-specific information including, but not limited to hour of production, vendor source of raw materials, production employees present, and operational status of microbial intervention process steps can be brought to bear in the context of the 391 individual single-unit production lots yielding a positive sample result, thereby providing an effective means not only to trace contamination, but also to affect remedial measures in view thereof

TABLE 1

Results of modular wet composite sampling of 62,919 multiple lots and number of Individual Production Unit Lot (IPUL) which tested positive when MWCS tested positive							
Location	Total # Analyses	#					
		Positives	1 IPUL	2 IPULs	3 IPULs	4 IPULs	5 IPULs
Est. A, B, C.	62,919	271	180	39	18	11	7

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the individual single-unit production lot (combo) samples whenever a positive result was obtained from the MWCS sample.

TABLE 1 shows that out of 62,919 MWCS samples, a total of 217 yielded a positive testing result for *E. coli* O157. Using prior art protocols, all of the single-unit production lots that comprised the 271 positive samples would go to rendering or be downgraded for cooking. As each MWCS represents five single-unit production lots of 2,000 lbs each, this would represent approximately 2,710,000 pounds of product (i.e., $271 \times 5 \times 2,000$ pounds = 2,710,000 pounds).

EXAMPLE II

(According to Particular Aspects of the Present Invention, the Inventive Sampling Methods have Substantial Utility in the Context of Ready-to-Eat (RTE) Products (e.g., Meat and Poultry Products))

Under United States Department of Agriculture, Food Safety and Inspection Service (USDA FSIS) guidelines, producers of Ready-to-Eat (RTE) meat and poultry products may adapt an 'end product' sampling program as verification that their product is free of the pathogen *Listeria monocytogenes*. The frequency of end product sampling is selected

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by the producer/establishment, based on valid sampling statistics. Typically, samples are collected at random times over a production shift (e.g., from ‘cleanup to cleanup’), and from several product lines. The samples are combined to form a composite sample, and enrichment buffer is added to the composite sample to allow *Listeria* spp. or *L. monocytogenes* to grow and multiply under the favorable conditions of enrichment, thereby providing more material that can be detected by subsequent analysis.

According to particular aspects of the present invention the producer of RTE meat or poultry products collects samples from individual single-unit production lots. Preferably, the producer defines and produces these single-unit lots in such a fashion as to maximize the information available for investigating the nature of a failure. For example, possible definitions of an individual single-unit production lot include, but are limited to all of the product produced by a particular production line (or produced by a particular production line in a particular period of time), a volume of product such as a pallet of packed boxes produced on a particular production line, or a production area in the plant, etc.

Individual single-unit production lot samples are collected, to which, in wet enrichment embodiments, enrichment medium/buffer is added. Following incubation under conditions suitable to allow levels of a target agent or organism that is present to reach detectable levels and become uniform or substantially uniform throughout the respective sample(s), aliquots of the enrichment medium/buffers from individual single-unit production lot samples are combined to form a MWCS. The MWCS is then analyzed for the presence or absence of, for example, *Listeria* spp. or *L. monocytogenes*. In the event that a positive result is obtained for the MWCS, enrichment medium/buffer sample from the individual single-unit production lot samples comprising that MWCS is analyzed using the same, or augmented testing protocols.

Individual single-unit production lots for which the enrichment medium/buffer from the corresponding sample yields a positive result are diverted to cooking, disposal or other safety endpoint. Individual single-unit production lots for which the enrichment medium/buffer from the corresponding sample yields a negative result are released into commerce. The latter fraction represents a direct cost savings to the producer relative to a prior art approaches where a ‘production lot’ is defined to include multiple single-unit production lots (e.g., multiple product lines and an extended period of time (‘cleanup to cleanup’)).

Furthermore, by defining and establishing the individual single-unit production lots in such a fashion as to maximize the information available for investigating the nature of a failure, the producer is able to narrow the scope of investigation and apply remedial resources more effectively and efficiently. For example, where a positive result(s) is associated with one or more specific production lines, targeted aggressive sanitation is used to resolve the problem. Alternatively, for example, where a positive result(s) is associated with one or more specific products, determining whether raw materials are contaminated, or whether process microbial intervention steps were operating properly are effectively and efficiently used.

EXAMPLE III

(According to Particular Aspects of the Present Invention, the Inventive Sampling Methods have Substantial Utility for

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Providing Cost-Effective and Effective Monitoring Means for Pathogen Levels in Nut Products (e.g., Almond Products) and the Like)

A large number of almond products may be produced by using one or more processes including slivering, scalding, blanching, slicing, roasting, and dicing. Anti-microbial treatments may also be applied, such as use of propylene oxide. In practice, these processes may be used in many various combinations, and the output from one process may be the input for another. This makes it very difficult to trace finished product all the way back to raw materials.

As indicated by a recent outbreak, almond products are susceptible to contamination by *Salmonella* spp. According to additional aspects, the present inventive methods provide a cost-effective means of implementing an effective monitoring program for pathogen levels in nut products (e.g., almond products). In such embodiments, final almond products of each type are collected at random times over a production shift. The producer defines and establishes individual single-unit production lots as the amount of product produced during a production shift (from ‘cleanup to cleanup’), or as some smaller production unit (e.g., a ‘truck-load’), provided that one sample was collected from each such single-unit production lot. The single-unit production lot samples are combined to form a corresponding composite sample, and, in wet enrichment embodiments, enrichment medium/buffer is added to the composite sample to allow *Salmonella* spp. to grow and multiply under the favorable conditions of enrichment (as described herein above), thereby providing more material that can be detected by subsequent analysis.

Aliquots of the enrichment medium/buffers from individual single-unit production lot samples are combined to form a MWCS. The MWCS are analyzed for the presence or absence, for example, of *Salmonella* spp. Where a positive result is obtained for the MWCS, each enrichment buffer from the individual single-unit production lot samples comprising that MWCS is analyzed using the same, or augmented testing protocols.

Individual single-unit production lots for which the enrichment buffer from the corresponding sample yields a positive result are returned for application of additional microbial intervention steps (e.g., roasting), or are diverted to a safe endpoint (e.g., a cooked product). Individual single-unit production lots for which the enrichment buffer from the corresponding sample yields a negative result are thereby validated and are releasable into commerce. The latter fraction represents a direct cost savings to the producer relative to prior art approaches where effective testing is not done, and discovery of contamination with a pathogen leads to large scale recalls of product.

Furthermore, by defining and establishing the individual production single-unit production lots in such a fashion as to maximize the information available for investigating the nature of a failure, the producer is able to narrow the scope of investigation and apply remedial resources more effectively and efficiently. For example, the processes used to produce the almond product(s) yielding positive result(s) are rationally analyzed, and associations between the pathogen contamination and one or more of the processes of slivering, scalding, blanching, slicing, roasting, and dicing are determined, and targeted effective and efficient remedial measures are applied.

EXAMPLE IV

(According to Particular Aspects of the Present Invention, the Inventive Sampling Methods have Substantial Utility in

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the Context of Contaminants that Enter a Production Line at a Given Time Point, and then Clear)

Sterility testing of food and pharmaceuticals, or purity testing of fermentation processes often involves compositing a number of samples to form a composite test lot. Detection of microbial contamination in the composite sample, as discussed in detail herein above, results in rejection of the whole production. Practically speaking, often a pinpoint contaminant enters production at a given time point, and then clears within a few minutes. Aspects of the present invention allow for identifying the time of entry, and informed elimination of products (operationally linked test lots) flanking the contamination event.

EXAMPLE V

(According to Particular Aspects of the Present Invention, the Inventive Sampling Methods have Substantial Utility in the Context of Environmental Monitoring (e.g., with Samples of Water, Wastewater, Sludge, Soil, Surface Sponges, Surface Swabs, Condensates, Air or Liquids))

In the context of environmental monitoring, when several samples (water, wastewater, sludge, soil, surface sponges, surface swabs, condensates, air or liquids) are composited and subjected to enrichment, followed by testing to detect environmental contamination, the current invention allows for pinpointing the test lots (e.g., operationally-linked unit(s)) that are positive for the microbe of concern.

The invention claimed is:

1. A method of sampling and testing products for microbes in multiple separate lots, comprising:

- a) separately collecting multiple independent samples from each of multiple separate lots, wherein each separate lot is separately sampled by taking said multiple independent samples thereof;
- b) separately compositing the collected multiple independent samples from each of the separate lots to provide a corresponding set of separate composited lot samples, wherein each of the separate composited lot samples is attributed to a particular corresponding separate lot;
- c) enriching each of the separate composited lot samples to provide a set of separate composited lot samples enriched for the target microbe(s);
- d) removing portions of each separate enriched composited lot sample, and combining the removed portions to provide a pooled modular composite sample; and
- e) testing of the pooled modular composite sample, using a suitable detection assay, for the target microbe(s), wherein when such testing is negative all of said samples that were composited to form the separate composited lot samples are deemed negative for the target microbe(s) and each of the multiple separate lots is validated, and wherein when such testing is positive, each of the individual separate composited lot samples that were used to form the pooled modular composite sample are individually tested to determine which of the separate composited lot samples is positive for the target microbe(s), wherein the lots corresponding to any negatively testing composited lot samples are validated.

2. The method of claim 1, wherein each of the multiple separate lots is selected from the group consisting of an environmental lot comprising multiple operationally-linked environmental specimens, pharmaceutical lot comprising multiple operationally-linked pharmaceutical specimens, single product lot comprising multiple operationally-linked product specimens, and combinations thereof.

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3. The method of claim 1, wherein each of the multiple separate lots is a single production lot, comprised of operationally-linked product specimens.

4. The method of claim 3, wherein product specimens are synonymous with product portions.

5. The method of claim 1, further comprising incubating the pooled modular composite sample of d), prior to testing in e).

6. The method of claim 1, wherein each separate composited lot sample in c) comprises incubating each separate composited lot sample with enrichment medium suitable to enrich for the target microbe(s), and wherein removing in d) comprises removing a portion of the enrichment medium from each enriched separate composited lot sample and combining the removed portions to provide a pooled modular composite sample.

7. The method of claim 6, wherein the enrichment medium comprises a selective agent that will inhibit a competing non-target microbe.

8. The method of claim 1, wherein testing of the pooled modular composite sample, using a suitable detection assay comprises use of a concentration step to concentrate the target microbe(s).

9. The method of claim 8 wherein the concentration step comprises at least one of immunomagnetic bead separation, and affinity chromatography.

10. The method of claim 1, wherein where testing in e) of the pooled modular composite sample is positive, and wherein the separate individual composited lot samples are further tested using a more sensitive protocol.

11. The method of claim 10, wherein the more sensitive protocol comprises use of a concentration step to concentrate the target microbe(s), in combination with the same test protocol used to test the pooled modular composite sample.

12. The method of claim 1, further comprising, forming an additional pooled modular composite sample from the set of enriched separate composited lot samples of c) and testing the additional pooled modular composite sample, using the same or a different suitable assay, to confirm the testing status.

13. The method of claim 1, further comprising, forming an additional pooled modular composite sample from an additional enriched separate composited lot sample along with any enriched separate composited lot samples of c) that test negative in e), and testing the additional pooled modular composite sample, using the same or a different suitable assay.

14. The method of claim 1, further comprising, where testing of the pooled modular composite sample in e) is negative, forming an additional pooled modular composite sample from the set of enriched separate composited test lot samples of c), and testing the additional pooled modular composite sample, using a different suitable assay, to confirm the negative testing status.

15. The method of claim 1, wherein each of the lots is selected from the lot group consisting of a single combo, single bin, single pallet, and a production assemblage.

16. The method of claim 1, wherein the number of separate lots is from 3 to 10.

17. The method of claim 1, further comprising, where testing of the pooled modular composite sample is positive, determining which individual separate lots are positive, application of remedial measures to said separate positive lots, and validating by further testing of the respective remediated separate lots and obtaining a negative test result.

18. The method of claim 1, wherein, in a), separately collecting said multiple independent samples from each of

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the multiple separate lots comprises separately collecting from each separate lot a number of samples from 5 to 100.

19. The method of claim 1, wherein, in a), separately collecting said multiple independent samples from each of the multiple separate lots comprises separately collecting 30 to 60 samples from each separate lot.

20. The method of claim 1, wherein, in a), separately collecting said multiple independent samples from each of the multiple separate lots comprises separately collecting at least 30 samples from each separate lot.

21. The method of claim 1, wherein, in a), separately collecting said multiple independent samples from each of the multiple separate lots comprises separately collecting at least 60 samples from each separate lot.

22. The method of claim 1, wherein removing portions in step d) is removing equal portions, aseptically, so as to preclude contamination of the enriched separate composited lot samples.

23. The method of claim 1, wherein the target microbe(s) comprises at least one selected from the group consisting of *Listeria*, *Salmonella* and *Escherichia coli*.

24. The method of claim 1, wherein the target microbe(s) comprises at least one selected from the group consisting of *Listeria* spp., *Listeria monocytogenes*, *Salmonella* spp., *Escherichia coli* O157:H7, coliforms and fecal coliforms.

25. The method of claim 1, wherein the target microbe(s) comprises a spoilage organism.

26. The method of claim 1, wherein removing portions of each separate enriched composited lot sample comprises removing equal volume portions of each separate enriched composited lot sample.

27. The method of claim 1, wherein testing of the pooled modular composite sample, using a suitable detection assay comprises use of at least one of a DNA-based method, an immunochemistry-based method, and a biosensor-based method.

28. The method of claim 1, wherein each of the multiple separate lots are production lots of a meat or poultry product, comprising an assemblage of one or more meat or poultry specimens, respectively.

29. The method of claim 28, wherein the meat or poultry specimens are meat trim pieces or poultry trim pieces, respectively.

30. The method of claim 28, wherein the meat is that of beef, pork, sheep or bison.

31. The method of claim 30, wherein the meat is that of beef.

32. The method of claim 1, wherein each of the multiple separate lots are separate production lots of a fish or seafood product, comprising an assemblage of one or more fish or seafood specimens, respectively.

33. The method of claim 1, wherein each of the multiple separate lots are separate production lots of a ready-to-eat product.

34. The method of claim 1, further comprising in (e) wherein when such testing of the modular composite sample is negative, nonetheless testing each of the separate composited lot samples for the target microbe(s) to enhance confidence in the negative testing results prior to deeming the lots validated or releasable into the chain of commerce.

35. The method of claim 1, further comprising, in (e) wherein when such testing of the pooled modular composite sample is positive, each of the individual separate composited lot samples that were used to form the pooled modular composite sample are individually tested to determine which of the separate composited lot samples is positive for the target microbe(s), retesting of the separate negatively testing

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composited lot samples to enhance confidence in the negative testing results prior to deeming the lots corresponding to the negatively testing composited lot samples validated or releasable into the chain of commerce.

36. The method of claim 1, wherein each of the multiple separate lots are production lots of produce, fruits, vegetable, herbs, or spices.

37. A method of sampling and testing products for microbe(s) in multiple separate lots, comprising:

- a) separately collecting multiple independent samples from each of multiple separate single production lots, wherein each separate single production lot is separately sampled by taking said multiple independent samples thereof;
- b) separately compositing the collected multiple independent samples from each of the separate lots to provide a corresponding set of separate composited single production lot samples, wherein each of the separate composited single production lot samples is attributed to a particular corresponding separate single production lot;
- c) enriching of the separate composited single production lot samples to provide a set of separate composited single production lot samples enriched for the target microbe(s);
- d) removing portions of each separate enriched composited single production lot sample, and combining the removed portions to provide a pooled modular composite sample; and
- e) testing of the pooled modular composite sample, using a suitable detection assay, for the target microbe(s), wherein when such testing is negative all of said samples that were composited to form the separate composited single production lot samples are deemed negative for the target microbe(s) and each of the multiple separate single production lots is validated, and wherein when such testing is positive, each of the individual separate composited single production lot samples that were used to form the pooled modular composite sample are individually tested to determine which of the separate composited single production lot samples is positive for the target microbe(s), wherein the single production lots corresponding to any negatively testing composited single production lot samples are validated.

38. The method of claim 37, wherein removing portions in step d) is removing equal portions, aseptically, so as to preclude contamination of the enriched separate composited single production lot samples.

39. The method of claim 37, further comprising in (e) wherein when such testing of the pooled modular composite sample is negative, nonetheless testing each of the separate composited single production lot samples for the target microbe(s) to enhance confidence in the negative testing results prior to deeming the single production lots validated or releasable for processing or into the chain of commerce.

40. The method of claim 37, further comprising, in (e) wherein when such testing of the modular composite sample is positive, each of the individual separate composited single production lot samples that were used to form the pooled modular composite sample are individually tested to determine which of the separate composited single production lot samples is positive for the target microbe(s), retesting of the separate negatively testing composited single production lot samples to enhance confidence in the negative testing results prior to deeming the single production lots corresponding to

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the negatively testing composited single production lot samples validated or releasable into the chain of commerce.

41. The method of claim 37, wherein each of the multiple separate single production lots are separate single production lots of a meat or poultry product, comprising an assemblage of one or more meat or poultry specimens, respectively. 5

42. The method of claim 41, wherein the meat or poultry specimens are meat trim pieces or poultry trim pieces, respectively. 10

43. The method of claim 42, wherein the meat is that of beef, pork, sheep, or bison.

44. The method of claim 43, wherein the meat is that of beef.

45. The method of claim 37, wherein each of the multiple separate single production lots are separate single production lots of a fish or seafood product, comprising an assemblage of one or more fish or seafood specimens, respectively. 15

46. The method of claim 37, wherein each of the multiple separate single production lots are separate single production lots of a ready-to-eat product. 20

47. The method of claim 37, wherein each of the multiple separate single production lots are separate single production lots of produce, fruits, vegetable, herbs, or spices.

48. The method of claim 37, wherein the target microbe(s) comprises at least one selected from the group consisting of *Listeria*, *Salmonella*, and *Escherichia coli*. 25

49. The method of claim 48, wherein the target microbe(s) comprises at least one selected from the group consisting of *Listeria* spp., *Listeria monocytogenes*, *Salmonella* spp., *Escherichia coli* O157:H7, coliforms, and fecal coliforms. 30

* * * * *

CIVIL COVER SHEET

The JS 44 civil cover sheet and the information contained herein neither replace nor supplement the filing and service of pleadings or other papers as required by law, except as provided by local rules of court. This form, approved by the Judicial Conference of the United States in September 1974, is required for the use of the Clerk of Court for the purpose of initiating the civil docket sheet. (SEE INSTRUCTIONS ON NEXT PAGE OF THIS FORM.)

I. (a) PLAINTIFFS

Institute for Environmental Health, Inc.

(b) County of Residence of First Listed Plaintiff King
(EXCEPT IN U.S. PLAINTIFF CASES)

(c) Attorneys (Firm Name, Address, and Telephone Number)

Zuber Lawler, LLP
100 Congress Avenue, Suite 2000
Austin, TX 78701 512-717-7431 Please see attached

DEFENDANTS

Food Safety Net Services, Ltd.

County of Residence of First Listed Defendant Bexar
(IN U.S. PLAINTIFF CASES ONLY)

NOTE: IN LAND CONDEMNATION CASES, USE THE LOCATION OF THE TRACT OF LAND INVOLVED.

Attorneys (If Known)

II. BASIS OF JURISDICTION (Place an "X" in One Box Only)

- ☐ 1 U.S. Government Plaintiff
- ☒ 3 Federal Question
(U.S. Government Not a Party)
- ☐ 2 U.S. Government Defendant
- ☐ 4 Diversity
(Indicate Citizenship of Parties in Item III)

III. CITIZENSHIP OF PRINCIPAL PARTIES (Place an "X" in One Box for Plaintiff and One Box for Defendant)

- | | PTF | DEF | | PTF | DEF |
|---|----------------------------|----------------------------|---|----------------------------|----------------------------|
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| Citizen of Another State | ☐ 2 | ☐ 2 | Incorporated and Principal Place of Business In Another State | ☐ 5 | ☐ 5 |
| Citizen or Subject of a Foreign Country | ☐ 3 | ☐ 3 | Foreign Nation | ☐ 6 | ☐ 6 |

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REAL PROPERTY ☐ 210 Land Condemnation ☐ 220 Foreclosure ☐ 230 Rent Lease & Ejectment ☐ 240 Torts to Land ☐ 245 Tort Product Liability ☐ 290 All Other Real Property	CIVIL RIGHTS ☐ 440 Other Civil Rights ☐ 441 Voting ☐ 442 Employment ☐ 443 Housing/Accommodations ☐ 445 Amer. w/Disabilities - Employment ☐ 446 Amer. w/Disabilities - Other ☐ 448 Education	PRISONER PETITIONS Habeas Corpus: ☐ 463 Alien Detainee ☐ 510 Motions to Vacate Sentence ☐ 530 General ☐ 535 Death Penalty Other: ☐ 540 Mandamus & Other ☐ 550 Civil Rights ☐ 555 Prison Condition ☐ 560 Civil Detainee - Conditions of Confinement			

V. ORIGIN (Place an "X" in One Box Only)

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35 U.S.C. section 1 et seq.

Brief description of cause:
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DEMAND \$

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VIII. RELATED CASE(S) IF ANY

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02/25/2021

SIGNATURE OF ATTORNEY OF RECORD

FOR OFFICE USE ONLY

RECEIPT #

AMOUNT

APPLYING IFP

JUDGE

MAG. JUDGE

Attachment for attorneys of record

Davis Wright Tremaine (Pro haec pending)
920 Fifth Avenue
Suite 3300
Seattle, WA 98104-1610
206-633-3150