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corrected

Maker of Fit gains license for pathogen fighter

By Bob Luder

(April 8, 2:10 p.m.) University of Georgia researchers have come up with a new pathogen-fighting technology — and licensed it to the maker of Fit Fruit and Vegetable Wash — that they claim kills a vast majority of dangerous E. coli and salmonella bacteria in less than one minute.

The licensing agreement between the University of Georgia Research Foundation, Athens, Ga., and HealthPro Brands Inc., Fit's parent company, extends the ranges of applications for the company's current antimicrobial food wash, said Todd Wichmann, president and chief executive officer of Cincinnati-based HealthPro.

Despite the speed at which the new technology works, the university researchers recommend that the wash be applied for 1-5 minutes. But the effectiveness in the new technology, Wichmann said, comes in its thoroughness in wiping out harmful bacteria. Wichmann said the former Fit wash formulation had what scientists call a "3- to 4-log kill," on produce — the equivalent of 99.99% effectiveness in killing bacteria.

In comparison, he said chlorine has 1-log kill, with a 90% effectiveness rate.

The research data on the new wash shows a seven-log kill, which Wichmann said factors out to a 99.99999% kill ratio.

"It's the first time a seven-log kill has been shown on produce," Wichmann said. "It's basically the same effect as irradiation without the bad effects."

In 2008, the Food and Drug Administration began allowing processors to use irradiation on fresh spinach and iceberg lettuce to kill E. coli and other pathogens. At the level approved, the texture and nutrition of spinach and lettuce aren't affected, and the process prolongs shelf life, according to the FDA.

Other vegetables and fruit, however, don't tolerate irradiation at certain levels.

"The re-formulated Fit food wash will kill more harmful microbes faster," said Mike Doyle, director of the Center for Food Safety at the University of Georgia and one of the technology's inventors, said in a news release.

"It is orders of magnitude more powerful and twice faster," Doyle said in the release.

Gennaro Gama, senior technology manager for the University of Georgia Research Foundation, said Doyle has worked on the technology for several years, but the primary

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studies on the product had been conducted in the last 1-2 years. Numerous pathogens were tested on foods, including fresh produce.

“Lettuce, tomatoes, other leafy greens like spinach, were purchased from stores and were tested,” Gama said. “The results were very good.”

Doyle said in the release that the new wash has no effects on smell, taste or appearance of the foods that are treated, even delicate produce. Shelf life is not affected, Doyle said.

Wichmann predicts the new technology will one day overtake chlorine as the primary washing agent for fresh produce and other foods.

“We have several well-known processors that already use this technology,” Wichmann said. “For Dr. Doyle to come out and announce a seven-log kill, this is what the industry has been waiting for. I believe in five years, 90% or more of processors in the industry will be using something other than chlorine to clean produce.”

(News Editor's note on correction: This article, when posted April 8, incorrectly reported the pathogen "kill rate" of the former formulation of Fit Fruit and Vegetable Wash. The error has since been corrected).

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