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PRESIDENT

Glen Hobson
205-441-5591
glen@handfmedia.net

DIRECTOR OF ADVERTISING

Brian Lockheart
205-624-2182
lockbrian692@gmail.com

DIRECTOR OF BUSINESS

Butch Cole
205-624-2180
butch@handfmedia.net

ADMINISTRATIVE DIRECTOR

Steven Hobson
steven@handfmedia.net

EDITOR

Brandon Greenhill
brandon@handfmedia.net

CREATIVE/ WEB DIRECTOR

Jacklyn Greenhill
jacklyn@handfmedia.net

P.O. Box 1568 • Pelham, AL 35124
Phone: 205-441-5591 • Fax: 205-624-2181
www.newconstructionproducts.com
info@newconstructionproducts.com



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Advanced Fire Detection System Fine-Tunes Sensitivity to Distinguish Smoke from Hazy Background Air

Specialized early smoke detection methods are necessary in areas with high atmospheric levels of background smoke and particulates that cause traditional devices to fail and false alarm.

Meat processing is the largest industry group in food and beverage manufacturing—based on sales, value added, and employment, with 26.2 percent of sales in 2021, according to the USDA ERS - Food and Beverage Manufacturing.

In recent years, however, there have been many documented fire incidents at meat processing plants across the globe, costing millions of dollars in damages in the United States alone. The causes can be quite varied, from electrical malfunction, equipment failure, and overheating machinery to the combustion of animal fats, oils, and other flammable materials. In the event of a fire, the meat processing plant can suffer costly, lengthy production downtime and often cannot reopen for an extended period due to extensive property damage and remediation measures.

Unfortunately, processors that butcher and package meat face unique fire protection challenges due to the nature of the working environment. These factors – namely the presence of smoke, steam, dust, particulates, oil, and water vapor – result not only from the butchering, rendering, and packaging of high-fat content animal proteins, but also from lubricants and hydraulic oil droplets, exhaust, and regular sanitary washdowns. This environmental “haze” wreaks havoc on standard smoke detectors, often causing them to fail, alarm excessively, or require excessive maintenance.

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“The challenge is finding a means to quickly and accurately distinguish between smoke from an actual fire and the typical airborne particulates in the background during meat processing,” says Jim Deakin, a fire alarm engineering technologist at API Systems Integrators, which provides complete life safety systems and is part of Western States Fire Protection.

Now, proactive meat processors are utilizing and tailoring industrial-grade fire protection systems such as VESDA, to maintain efficient operations with minimal false alarms and maintenance.

Implementing VESDA systems, the sensitivity of the fire detection equipment can be fine-tuned to reliably distinguish between smoke from an actual fire and other factors regularly found in the background air. This not only increases the safety of personnel but also protects the plant, production equipment, inventory, and other assets while facilitating fire safety compliance.

Resolving a Smoke Detection Challenge

When a meat processing plant in the U.S. sought to add reliable smoke detectors to three refrigerated vacuum pump rooms at the request of its fire insurance company, it faced a difficult task. In the three rooms, pumps used to vacuum seal meat products for distribution were creating an environmental hazard.

“The exhaust was intermingling with water vapor from washdowns in a manner that could hinder the operation of traditional fire detection devices. In addition, there was a visible accumulation of lubricant residue on nearby surfaces near the vacuum exhaust,” says Deakin. “It was clear that traditional smoke detectors would not function properly in this environment.”

To minimize potential losses due to unwanted alarms and provide the best possible long-term detection system, Deakin proposed a solution that involved installing two complementary VESDA smoke detection systems from Honeywell in each room, in what would be a performance-based application.

As an International Code Council (ICC) accepted alternative, performance-based design allows “alternate materials and methods” that offer equivalent or superior fire safety performance. With this approach, processors can consider a design acceptable if the fire engineering analysis demonstrates that it meets the measurable per-



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formance criteria set at the start of the process.

The risk insurer and meat processor sought a fire detection system that was fully compliant with NFPA 61- Standard for the Prevention of Fires and Dust Explosions in Agricultural and Food Processing Facilities.

“One VESDA system [the VLI] will provide an atmospheric reference in each vacuum pump room, minimizing unwanted alarms. A second VESDA system

[the VLI] will determine when smoke contamination from a fire exceeds the atmospheric reference and then activate the building’s fire alarm,” says Khaleel Rehman, director of development for the advanced detection team at Honeywell.

According to Rehman, a VESDA VLI system utilizes a piping network to draw in air from the protected area to a central location, which facilitates smoke detector reliability and reduces potential contamination.

With more detailed information to analyze, installers can program the unit to differentiate smoke from other factors that could cause disruptive false alarms. In meat processing plants, airborne dust and particles may be present which can confuse some systems that incorrectly register them as smoke. In response, the unit’s dust rejection and data analytics minimize nuisance alarms by at least three times, compared to similar technologies.

The detector’s high-sensitivity chambers and cumulative sampling can deliver one of the earliest possible fire warnings. The detector combines an intelligent filter with an advanced clean-air barrier for optics protection, providing a long detection chamber life without the need for recalibration.

In the second layer of VESDA smoke detection, a VLI unit integrates in an interdependent, cross-zone fashion with the VLI. With this configuration, the VLI determines when smoke contamination from a fire exceeds the initial atmospheric reference. When it does, the unit activates the fire alarm system. The VLI is designed to provide consistent performance throughout its service life, with a technology that uses a clean air barrier to keep its optical detection chamber components clean.

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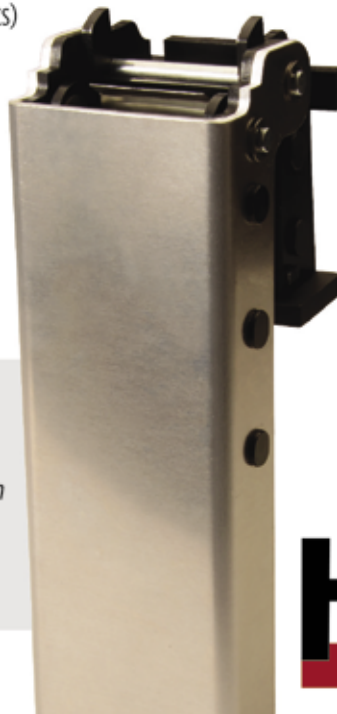
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cess, this meat packing plant has three S3 Gamewell FCI Fire Alarm Panels – non-networked and connected to a VESDA Detector for 24/7 monitoring purposes,” says Deakin of API Systems Integrators.

“Most of the VESDA units are now set for a level of obscuration of approximately 6%, which is almost double the level that typical smoke detectors can tolerate. Most other traditional technology would have an excessive number of nuisance alarms at those levels of obscuration,” adds Deakin.

To further enhance smoke detector reliability, Honeywell is providing a pipe cleaning system designed to blow air and debris out of the VESDA piping network and sample ports. The system minimizes any potential contamination inside the sampling network.

According to Rehman, after successful testing and installation, the fire insurance company that originally initiated the project was happy with the results. With the integrated VESDA smoke detection, the plant is also on track to significantly improve its fire safety for many years to come.

“Although the dual layer VESDA smoke detection system was used in a meat processor’s refrigerated vacuum pump rooms in this application, the same approach can be used in many other areas that can be prone to fire risk, atmospheric particulates, and false alarms,” concludes Rehman.

For more information, contact Dawn Wotapka, Director of External Communications at Honeywell, 715 Peachtree Street, N.E., Atlanta, GA 30308; email: dawn.wotapka@honeywell.com .

www.honeywell.com •



In addition, a user-initiated feature helps to prevent nuisance alarms by introducing clean air into the detection chamber and taking a reference reading of the chamber background. This reading is then offset against the actual environmental background to maintain consistent, absolute smoke detection.

Used together, the two VESDA smoke detection systems enable meat processors to set alarm thresholds above specific site background contamination levels as a further safeguard against nuisance alarms.

“To improve reliability, we implemented performance-based system design and testing because the background smoke and obscuration levels were continually high. Once the level of sensitivity is set, the system can automatically accommodate for almost any environmental condition,” says Rehman.

After Deakin provided a log of the system’s action alerts in the room with the vacuum pumps, Rehman compared these with the background levels of smoke and particulates obscuration, and manually adjusted the alarm sensitivity to compensate. The system’s “auto learn mode” now provides the ability to periodically adjust alarm sensitivity as needed.

“To mitigate fire risk and minimize false alarms, we deployed a meticulously engineered solution capable of discriminating between the smoke from an actual fire and the typical airborne oil and smoke particulates in the background. To assist in the pro-

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A Better Home for the Future



A home insurance crisis is forcing builders to rethink designs. This has some looking at concrete where a trend is breaking ground and alleviating some drawbacks of wood-framed homes

Homeowners across the U.S. are running out of options when it comes to protecting their homes. The problem is that climate change has increased the risk of catastrophic damage due to windstorms, flooding, and wildfires. With the cost of rebuilding after a disaster rapidly increasing, insurance agencies are passing along the burden to homeowners, with no end in sight. In fact, according to a report from First Street Foundation – a nonprofit research group – almost 1/3rd of all homeowners in the lower 48 states are already struggling to find affordable insurance. Without cost-effective coverage, the housing market's future is in peril.

While governments and the insurance industry grapple with viable solutions, there is growing discussion as to the future of residential construction and the pursuit of a more durable alternative to wood-framed, single-family homes. This is of particular importance to those living in areas where natural disasters like hurricanes, tornadoes, and wildfires devastate thousands of wooden structures every year in the US.

While looking for an advanced technology for the future, some home builders are looking to improve upon a design that has been used in other parts of the world throughout history; namely concrete. The ancient Romans and Greeks were very successful in constructing just about everything from homes to

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stadiums out of concrete – some of which are still standing centuries later.

There are a number of advantages to utilizing concrete over wood. Most notably, of course, is its durability which greatly outperforms wood-framed homes. Additionally, unlike wood, concrete is not vulnerable to external factors like insects, moisture, mold, fire, or wind - all of which can result in structural damage and pose safety risks.

Yet, even with the advantages to utilizing concrete there are some significant reasons for the lack of wide-spread adoption. Chief among them is the high cost of construction. Other drawbacks include concrete's poor insulation, less appealing finishes and designs, and the added time required

for construction.

Recent innovations, however, are not only eliminating these drawbacks, but promise a huge reduction in initial cost, making them comparable to wood-framed structures. In fact, when lifetime upkeep, insurance, and other expenses are factored in, concrete homes are expected to greatly reduce the total cost of ownership.

Driving down construction costs

"What we are seeing in the concrete industry today is incredible. The things we thought would be horribly expensive just five years ago, we're doing every day now," says Mark Sinicrope, Precast Specialist at Master Builders – a provider of chemical solutions for concrete construction.

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Sinicrope has more than 40 years of experience working with precast and prestressed concrete products in applications ranging from bridge beams to parking garages. While most of the advancements and cost cutting to date has been on the commercial side, Sinicrope is starting to see those innovations flow into residential concrete home construction. For example, Sinicrope recently helped Texas-based Nonquit Homes with a concrete mix design used to develop tilt-up, prestressed concrete panels for residential construction.

“What they are doing is pretty much the same thing we are seeing for large-scale commercial buildings,” explains Sinicrope. “In fact, the new Tesla plant in Austin has a very similar sandwich panel design, and they go up like a big Erector Set.”

However, the residential concept from Nonquit Homes is also aiming to eliminate some of the traditional shortcomings of commercial concrete

construction. To begin with, the prestressed sandwich panels can be poured on site, thus eliminating the need to be transported in from a precast manufacturer – which reduces both cost and time.

Time

“In construction, it is all about how fast you can go,” adds Sinicrope. “Let’s say I wanted to put up a parking garage today. We could have it up in two or three weeks, but it might take a year or more be-

cause we have to wait for someone to actually produce all those concrete panels and then ship them to the jobsite.”

Costs are further trimmed by reducing the size of the panels so there is no need to bring in expensive cranes to move large panels around the jobsite. Instead, the panels can be maneuvered by forklifts – which also cuts down on labor.

“I can see an entire house going up with just 3 or 4 people onsite to tilt up the panels and set them in place,” says Terrell Wiggins from Nonquit Homes, who along with engineer Alonso Forcado, designed and built the first residential home outside of Atlanta using this style of construction. “Plus, you’re not sitting there waiting on the framer or struggling to schedule all the different trades required to build the actual house. For a builder, that is huge.”

Depending on the size, a typical wood-framed home can take 6 months to a year to complete.

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However, once a builder gets going and perfects this new concrete building process, they could greatly reduce that build time.

Durability

While the insurance crisis is illuminating the need for more durable housing, climate change will only increase the urgency. According to data from NOAA, there were 60 weather and climate-related disasters in the U.S. from 2020 to 2022, with losses exceeding \$1 billion per year. For comparison, between 1980 and 2019 the average per year was eight.

Concrete homes can even withstand the extremely high winds associated with large hurricanes and tornados.

“Today, precast can hold up to a 200 mile an hour wind load, depending on how it’s designed,” explains Sinicrope.

However, it is often not just the straight-line wind that causes significant damage during a wind event. Shrapnel from other structures is also a major concern. As part of that, the Precast Concrete Institute (PCI) wanted to test the durability of concrete panels by pitting them against both a concrete block wall and a wooden house with brick veneer.

“They fired the two-by-fours out of an air cannon at 150 MPH at the concrete sandwich panel and the lumber shattered into toothpicks, without any damage to the panels” adds Wiggins. “However, it blew a massive hole straight through the exterior of both the brick and cinderblock wall.”

Energy Efficiency

Another area of concern being addressed by new concrete home designs is energy efficiency. While concrete is very dense and therefore airtight, it is not considered a good insulator. By incorporating a thick layer of insulation into the concrete panels, however, the energy efficiency of the home can exceed that of a traditional wood-framed home.

In addition, adding the insulation into the casting process further reduces construction time and costs by eliminating the need for insulation and sheetrock along the exterior walls.

Design

Traditional concrete homes typically offered limited architectural design options. However, the concrete industry has come a long way and design choices are now almost endless with colored, patterned, and textured concrete.

Additionally, you can utilize traditional exteriors such as stone, brick or stucco to add the coveted curb appeal.



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Further savings

While builders can see their construction costs greatly reduced by utilizing these new methods for building concrete homes, homeowners also stand to benefit. Not only does it promise a much safer option, with lower energy consumption and fewer repairs, but there are several government and banking incentives to buying concrete as well.

For instance, concrete homeowners may qualify for Energy Efficient Mortgages (EEM) allowing borrowers to qualify for a larger loan amount due to the ongoing energy savings that result in much lower energy bills.

Some of the biggest savings, however, are likely to be seen in the dramatic drop in monthly insurance premiums. Many insurance companies already offer lower rates for concrete homes because they produce far fewer claims arising from

fire, wind and water damage, or pests.

As insurance becomes scarce and costs surge, homebuyers will have no choice but to walk away from deals on wood-framed homes. This could be the crux for a major shift in residential home building. Especially if the right design can make sense for a home builder's bottom line.

"Like with anything else, it just takes one person to figure out a way to make it profitable and everybody will jump in," concludes Sinicrope. "When it comes to residential concrete homes, I think we've finally reached that point."

For more information about concrete residential homes contact Nonquit Homes via phone at (361) 972-6260, email info@nonquithomes.com or visit www.nonquithomes.com •



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Dorlen	20	www.oil-alert.com
Emars Inc	21	www.emarsinc.com
Essex Steel	7	www.essexsteel.com
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Hinge Post	9	www.hingepost.com
Lignomant	23	www.lignomat.com
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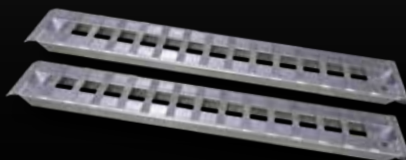


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