

Born Free Eggs etches data on its fragile wares

By Robert Weisman, Globe Staff

Watertown businessman David Radlo wants to protect the nation from agroterrorism, one eggshell at a time.

Today Radlo, chief executive of egg producer Radlo Foods, is hatching an affiliated Watertown company, Born Free Eggs, to market safer and fresher eggs, laser-etched with expiration dates and numerical codes that trace each egg from the farm to the store.

The development is partly a response to a warning from the Department of Homeland Security that eggs are among the foods most vulnerable to tampering by terrorists, Radlo said. But it's also a response, he said, to the growing number of consumers who are demanding that their eggs be organic or come from farms that don't cage chickens.

"It's kind of a red state-blue state phenomenon," Radlo said. "A lot of people from the red states seem to like the homeland security part of it. And a lot of people from the blue states want to make sure they have the best, freshest products they can serve their families."

Born Free Eggs will be the first brand to use laser etchings on eggshells, said the 41-year-old Radlo, who will be unveiling his company and discussing its technology today at the National Press Club in Washington during a Consumer Federation of America conference on national food policy.

But the laser technology is only one part of a larger "traceability management system" that also includes sensors monitoring the air, water, and cold storage on farms, the

testing and vaccination of chickens for salmonella, and, later this fall, tamper-proof egg cartons.

"I think they're ahead of the curve in this area," said Washington agricultural strategy consultant Gus Schumacher, former under secretary for farm and foreign agricultural services during the Clinton administration.

"People want to know where their food is coming from, how it's produced, what's in it, and how it's stored and transported," he said. "That's why you're seeing an explosion in organic foods."

Schumacher said the etching system may be new to eggs, though other companies have begun experimenting with similar systems to trace fruits and vegetables through the agricultural supply chain.

Even before Born Free is formally launched, Radlo has been distributing laser-etched eggs in test markets at about 1,000 stores in the Northeast, including Roche Bros., Demoulas Super Markets, and Hannaford Bros. stores in the Boston area.

Next weekend, the company will extend its distribution of the eggs to Shaw's markets. The etchings on individual egg shells will supplant the "sold by" dates now posted on most egg cartons.

They will include an expiration date apprising consumers when they should throw eggs away, as well as a number that will trace the history of each egg and certify that it has been produced under appropriate conditions.

It will also prevent tampering by ensuring that eggs are grouped together in the right carton.

An additional tamper-proofing step will be new sealed cartons, which Born Free plans to roll out this fall, enabling consumers to peek through plastic to ensure that eggs aren't cracked.

Radlo said the tamper-proof cartons will be optional because some consumers prefer to open egg

cartons to examine the eggs at the supermarket.

Radlo Foods, founded in 1916, is a third-generation family business that sells eggs nationally and abroad, from Canada to Cuba to Hong Kong.

The company, which books an estimated \$25 million to \$30 million in annual sales, recently struck an agreement to become the first US producer to export eggs to Afghanistan.

David Radlo, the company's majority owner, said he decided to open Born Free to capitalize on new trends among consumers worried about health and safety in the food chain.

Radlo said he conducted focus groups to make sure consumers weren't turned off by the notion of etching eggshells with lasers.

"In the egg industry, we're very consumer focused," he said. "We're doing this to meet the consumers' needs."

The laser technology, similar to that used for eye surgery, is being supplied by EggFusion Inc., a Deerfield, Ill., start-up that modified a laser and installed software to control the eggshell etchings.

The company is currently developing a more advanced laser system for the egg industry, said Shaun Emerson, the EggFusion chief executive.

While the tracing of eggs is not mandated by the government, "this is something we're selling as a value-added," Emerson said.



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