

## **PROPER SCALDER MANAGEMENT USING PKA® PROCESS WATER ACIDIFIER**

The use of hot water immersion scalders is an important step in the slaughter process for poultry. Most establishments use a multi-stage, counter flow scalding system but single-stage scalding systems can still be found. A properly managed scalding system prepares the carcasses for picking without reducing yield or increasing the pathogen load on the carcass. Achieving that proper balance is not always easy and many processors struggle to get the birds to pick easily without sacrificing yield. Others manage to achieve their yield goals but in so doing turn the scalding system into a large Salmonella incubator.

***There are three important characteristics to a well-managed scalding system:  
scald temperature, scald water pH, and good counter flow of water.***

### ***Scald Water Temperature***

The proper temperature at each stage of the scalding system is important and it can vary based on the objectives desired at each plant. Typically, the lowest temperature occurs in the first stage with a temperature increase in both the second and third stages. To control microbial growth by temperature alone, the temperature should be kept at least 5°C higher than your target organism can withstand. Because Salmonella growth occurs up to a temperature of 45°C, scalding water typically has been kept above 50°C to prevent Salmonella growth from occurring. The final stage of the scalding system is often run at a temperature between 55°C and 60°C. In addition, too low of a temperature in the absence of scalding additives can make picking more difficult, causing yield loss through carcass damage.



In some establishments, the use of these higher scalding temperatures causes an unacceptable loss of yield due to the loss of subdermal fat. Because poultry fat is unsaturated, it liquefies at temperatures above 55°C. This liquefied fat under the skin of the carcasses begins to drain from the birds as they move down the processing line. The loss of this liquefied fat can cause a build-up of fat residue in the chiller. This greatly increases the organic load within the chiller making it very difficult to properly manage chlorine levels in the chill water. In addition, this emulsified fat coats equipment and carcasses protecting any Salmonella cells that are present reducing the effectiveness of On-Line Reprocessing (OLR) systems.

### ***Scalding Water pH***

The way to combat this yield loss without increasing pathogen loads is to combine lower scalding water temperatures with low water pH. By using acidic processing aids as scalding additives, the water in the scalding tanks can be maintained at a pH of 3.0 or below combating any microbial bloom that would otherwise occur due to the low temperatures. This way, scalding temperatures of 43°C-52°C can be used for increased yield without incurring microbial growth. In a recent University of Georgia Processing Tip, Dr. Scott Russell shared the results of two in-plant trials where acidic scalding additives were used to maintain scalding pH at 2.0-4.0 in conjunction with low scalding

temperature. In those trials, an average yield increase of over 1% was observed without negatively impacting microbial numbers.

If the scalders are being run at temperatures below 50°C, then it is important to maintain scald pH at 3.0 or below for all three stages of the scald. This acidic pH counterbalances any negative impact that might occur due to these low temperatures. The usage of acids to maintain the water pH below 3.0 pH also allows the picking fingers to grasp the feathers more efficiently for easier removal. This contrasts with the use of alkaline scald additives such as caustic soda which raise the pH above 9.0, making the birds very slippery and often causing picker damage. Maintaining scald water pH is not as easy as maintaining chill water pH due to the massive amounts of organic material in the scald system. In addition, the incoming load of fecal material varies greatly from flock to flock and season to season. Because of this, the addition rate of acids can vary greatly as the shift progresses due to the incredible buffering capacity of fecal material.

Automatic feedback systems that adjust pH in real time can be very useful in this application and are the preferred delivery method to ensure tight pH control throughout the shift as the buffering capacity of the fecal material in the scald varies. In addition, plants should take manual pH readings on an hourly basis to verify the proper functioning of the automatic system.

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### **Counter Flow of Scald Water**

Good counter flow of scald water is a must regardless of what targets are desired for the other two characteristics. Often scalders resemble more of a stagnant water bath than a constant flowing stream. In order to maintain good counter flow, establishments need to have an accurate measure of the water flowing through the system. It is not uncommon for management to grossly over- or underestimate the turnover rate of the scald water. Accurate water measurements are needed in order to monitor overflow rate throughout the processing shift and to be able to make adjustments as needed. This becomes even more important if chemical additives are being used in the scald in order to maintain proper concentration of any additives throughout the shift. The higher the rates of water overflow, the more the birds are being washed and the attached fecal matter is being diluted. This is especially important as fecal material will build up at the bottom of the scald tanks as the shift progresses. The more stagnant the water is, the deeper the fecal sludge that accumulates at the bottom of the tank. Because water temperature within the scald tank decreases from the top to the bottom of the tank, the temperature within this fecal layer may be only 40°-44°C, allowing for Salmonella growth within the tank. In addition, the increasing buffering capacity within the tank as this fecal material accumulates will make it more difficult to regulate chemical additions to the scalders as the shift progresses. Pre-scald brushes are used by some facilities to remove balls of fecal material attached to the feathers prior to the birds entering the scald. In most instances, the benefit of lower fecal material in the scald outweighs the risk of cross-contamination of carcasses using the brushes.



**Figure.** The use of PKA® process water acidifier in the scald is meant to counterbalance the pH increase that occurs due to the presence of fecal material.

### **PKA® Process Water Acidifier**

PKA® Process Water Acidifier is a natural mineral acid salt approved as a processing aid for pH control of processing water in meat and poultry plants. PKA is manufactured under FDA's Good Manufacturing Practices and HACCP

program. The facility is in compliance with ISO 9001-2000 and received a “Superior” rating from the American Institute of Baking. PKA includes a license for use in applications covered by U.S. patents 5,958,491, 6,132,792, and 6,620,445 B1. PKA can be used in all processing water to maintain proper water pH for the particular stage of the process. Many facilities are familiar with PKA usage in chill tanks, for example. Because PKA is a processing aid, it can be used in any location of the plant without additional labeling requirements. The usage of PKA in scalders allows plants to maintain scald water pH at the proper target pH for that facility. Whether plants use a high or low-temperature scald process, PKA is easily capable of keeping scald water at pH 2.0-4.0. PKA application allows plants to maximize scald performance in terms of picking and yield without sacrificing other performance parameters.

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The addition of PKA® for pH control is a simple matter and can be done with a number of commercially available systems. Care should be taken with the management of the equipment to insure proper control. It is also important to determine the typical conditions of the water through manual testing to establish the proper set points for the equipment. In all cases the use of automated equipment cannot eliminate the need for regular manual testing to verify the proper operation of the delivery equipment.

Unlike other scald acidifiers, the classification of PKA® as a processing aid gives establishments maximum flexibility in customizing a complete scald program that best fits their operations. It allows the scald program to be a dynamic one that can easily change as the plant’s needs change without any regulatory usage restrictions.

