

Keeping Pests At Bay

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Strategies for identifying sustainable and effective pest-control methods

Sustainability is defined as “the ability to be maintained at a certain level.” When it comes to rodent control in the restaurant industry, the level of acceptable protection is essentially 100 percent. Health inspectors and restaurant patrons have a zero-tolerance policy when it comes to rodents, as they should. Rodents carry diseases and parasites, spread salmonella and other bacteria through their droppings, and even trigger asthma attacks.

Strategies and tools that provide long-term protection against pests are critical. Unfortunately, pest-management strategies have long been dominated by the quest for “silver bullet” products to control pest outbreaks after they’ve been identified. These reactive measures only offer short-term relief, however, because they don’t treat the underlying problem: How and why did rodents get inside in the first place? Without addressing this fundamental question, pest control remains a vicious cycle: A rodent problem is identified, measures are taken. Rinse and repeat.

Sustainability is also defined as “supporting long-term ecological balance.” In this vein, sustainable pest-control solutions must also consider whether there is a negative impact on non-target species and the environment. Studies show that Brodifacoum, one of the world’s most widely used rodenticides, also has one of the highest risks of secondary poisoning to non-target mammals and birds that eat poisoned rodents. And, of course, the use of poisons and harsh chemicals around people and food is never a preferred solution. As such, pesticides and rodenticides are coming under increased regulatory pressure due to safety and environmental concerns. For a solution to be sustainable, it most certainly cannot create further risks and potential problems.

A Better Approach

The most effective and truly sustainable pest-management strategies include exclusion: creating lasting physical barriers against rodents and other pests to prevent them from entering a building. Regarded among professionals as the optimal form of pest control, exclusion involves the elimination of cracks, crevices and other spaces that allow pests to gain entry.

Mice can squeeze through an opening as small as ¼ inch and can climb wires and rough vertical surfaces, which makes access points easy for them to find. Common entry points include exterior doors, loading dock doors, vents and points where electrical, water, gas, sewer and HVAC lines enter a building. Rodents can also gain access through small cracks in the foundation, beneath roofing tiles and by gnawing through rubber door sweeps. And once inside, they can move between rooms or floors through small openings.

Each of these areas must be safeguarded with proper exclusion materials. While caulk, mortar, spray foam, steel wool and copper mesh are all popular solutions, each has its downfall. Caulk, mortar and spray foam are inexpensive, yet offer little to no protection against gnawing rodents. Steel wool rusts and decomposes over time and requires regular replacement. Copper mesh, while effective, can be difficult to install and often comes loose over time, compromising efficacy. It also discolors, which can lead to staining. The best exclusion materials are made of stainless steel or other permanent elements that neither time nor rodents can degrade.

Addressing Problem Areas

Long-term solutions in the fight against pests can only be achieved by addressing the root of the issue and then continually monitoring for changes. All other tactics—such as poisons, traps, etc.—should serve only as backup. Any and all practices that have allowed rodents and other pests to reach “pest status” must be considered and addressed. For example:

- Is unsecured garbage left outside, attracting pests?
- Are vines or nearby landscaping providing nesting areas for rodents?
- Are external doors left propped open?
- Are there gaps beneath exterior doors, inviting rodents to literally walk through the front door?
- Do cracks around windows or screens grant easy access?
- Are tiny gaps surrounding utility or plumbing lines creating an entryway?

It is critical that these and other property weaknesses be addressed. It is also important to train personnel and discuss expectations to achieve an effective pest-management strategy. Consider the following questions:

- Are staff incentivized and encouraged to report evidence of pests? Do they know what to look for? Train employees in how to identify signs of a potential pest problem and to report any disturbances to food packaging that could reflect rodent activity.
- Are staff and subcontractors expected to follow practices that will help prevent pest problems? Sanitation is critical to sustained pest management. Garbage should be secured and kept as far away from the building as possible, storage areas should be monitored with stock rotated frequently, and food-contact surfaces and floors must be sanitized regularly. Exterior doors should not be propped open for deliveries.

While effective pest management requires diligence and a focused effort from all personnel, it should not be considered a DIY activity. For food-service establishments in particular, pest-management professionals can and should be engaged to implement and monitor an effective strategy. Any qualified pest-control company will include prevention and exclusion as part of their services, and many will offer employee training assistance as well.

Sustainable pest control in the restaurant industry will always require vigilance and upkeep, because rodents are tenacious in their pursuit of food and shelter. But embracing exclusion as a preventive measure is by far the most effective solution in the ongoing battle against pests. Rather than attempting to treat each and every infestation as it occurs, exclusion works to stop the problem at its source, putting an end to the vicious cycle.

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