



Ad Hoc Group on Food Safety

OVERVIEW OF FOOD SAFETY SYSTEMS AND ACTIVITIES

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This document was approved by the Ad Hoc Group on Food Safety at its 27-28 April meeting.

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FOREWORD

As part of the OECD response to the request of G8 Heads of State and Government “to undertake a study of the implications of biotechnology and other aspects of food safety”, the OECD Council established the Ad Hoc Group on Food Safety. This Group, composed of senior officials and experts from capitals with food safety policy responsibilities, was asked to report on what is being done at the national and international level to address current and emerging food safety issues. Specifically, the Terms of Reference for the Ad Hoc Group were:

- To supervise the compilation of a compendium of current and planned international food safety systems and activities, as outlined in Annex 3 of *OECD Work on Biotechnology and Other Aspects of Food Safety* [C(99)148(REV4)];
- To undertake the compilation of a compendium of current and planned national food safety systems and activities, based on reports from Member countries in which reference may be made to precautionary approaches and principles;
- To provide a report to Council on the results of its work, including the compendia of international and national food safety systems and activities, the ongoing work across the Organisation and related work underway in capitals or otherwise available to members, as part of the response to the G8 request, in order to contribute to international and national efforts in the area of food safety.

Under the chairmanship of Dr. Ewald Wermuth, Special Advisor to The Netherlands Minister for Agriculture, Nature Management and Fisheries on Biotechnological and Safety Issues, the Ad Hoc Group on Food Safety prepared and approved the final report for transmission to the OECD Council. This report includes the following elements:

- Overview of Food Safety Systems and Activities: Executive Summary [SG/ADHOC/FS(2000)6/FINAL]
- Overview of National Food Safety Systems and Activities [SG/ADHOC/FS(2000)5/FINAL]
- Overview of International Organisations with Food Safety Activities (Part I of Overview and Compendium of International Organisations with Food Safety Activities) [SG/ADHOC/FS(2000)4/FINAL]
- Compendium of National Food Safety Systems and Activities [SG/ADHOC/FS(2000)5/ANN/FINAL]
- Compendium of International Organisations with Food Safety Activities (Part II of Overview and Compendium of International Organisations with Food Safety Activities) [SG/ADHOC/FS(2000)4/FINAL]

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Key messages from the Ad Hoc Group on Food Safety report include:

- Overall, national food safety systems are doing an effective job of protecting public health. Advances in scientific understanding, a desire for more effective systems and greater public awareness of foodborne diseases are driving governments to strengthen their food safety institutions and regulations. Many countries are increasing attention to microbial contamination of foods to reduce foodborne illness; also, the regulation of food and agricultural products derived from modern biotechnology is an issue that all OECD countries are addressing. Under their existing food safety systems, countries are addressing these and other issues, though sometimes in different ways.
- The fundamental principle underlying national food safety systems is human health protection. Public concerns go beyond food safety to include such issues as the quality of food, how it is produced, use of modern biotechnology and the environment. Domestic food safety regulations can have an impact on trade, although international trade agreements impose certain requirements upon national regulations.
- Risk analysis, consisting of scientific risk assessment, risk management and risk communication, is the model used by OECD countries in making food safety decisions. These decisions increasingly take into account international standards, guidelines and recommendations. Differences across OECD countries as to decisions on individual products often reflect differences in the appropriate level of protection which has been established. There are also differences in the manner in which other legitimate factors relevant for the health protection of consumers and for the promotion of fair practices in food trade are taken into account in food safety risk management. How precaution should be applied to food safety in circumstances of scientific uncertainty is being discussed to promote understanding of the various viewpoints on the subject and to achieve greater global consensus on this issue, in particular in the Codex Alimentarius Commission.
- International organisations play a major role in facilitating international dialogue, in building consensus towards a science-based, rules-based approach to assessment, and in harmonising of food safety standards. It is important that these activities engage both developing and developed countries and are open and transparent. Further co-operation among scientists, regulatory authorities, and other interested organisations would contribute to improving health protection, facilitating trade and increasing consumer confidence. Communication and consultation with stakeholders on all aspects of food safety at all stages of the decision-making process are key to a credible, open, transparent and accountable food safety system.