

codex alimentarius commission



FOOD AND AGRICULTURE
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JOINT FAO/WHO FOOD STANDARDS PROGRAMME

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THE INTERNATIONAL PORTAL FOR FOOD SAFETY, ANIMAL AND PLANT HEALTH (Submission from FAO)

INTRODUCTION

1. FAO has led an interagency initiative - with CBD, OIE, WHO and WTO - to develop and maintain an internet-based portal - **the International Portal on Food Safety, Animal and Plant Health** - to allow users to search for current standards, regulations and other official materials relevant to the WTO's Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS Agreement) from a single access point: <http://www.ipfsaph.org>.
2. The portal is a practical tool which can be used by researchers, policy makers, the private sector and others to answer a wide range of SPS-related questions. The portal helps:
 - build awareness of key international standards, as well as the measures used to implement them, among officials responsible for these domains;
 - increase awareness of the market access requirements applied by actual or potential trading partners; and
 - support domestic efforts at consumer, environmental and agricultural sector protection.
3. Previous Codex Alimentarius Commission Information papers (e.g., CAC28/INF4) provide background information on the objectives and design considerations behind the system.
4. The portal has now been 'live' since May 2004. This paper describes the achievements during the first two years of operation, and outlines plans to exploit the system to improve national capacity to address SPS issues in the period 2006-2008.

ABOUT THE SYSTEM

5. The portal currently (May 2006) contains over 25 000 records which link to the following types of content:
 - International and national standards, official guidelines and recommended codes of practice;
 - Notifications;
 - National legislation and regulations;
 - Risk analyses, including from JECFA, JMPR, and JEMRA;

- Maximum Residue Limits- from Codex and available national sources;
 - National contact points for Codex, IPPC, OIE, WTO SPS and CBD.
6. Usage figures for the system continue to be encouraging. The number of daily page views (excluding crawlers) has increased from an early average of 5 000 per day (July 2004) to around 16 000 (May 2006). Around 600 documents are downloaded each day. The site continues to receive a growing number of queries to the webmaster account and the helpdesk (general query) feature.
 7. Work has continued on addressing the issue of limited internet bandwidth availability in some developing countries. The latest development is that the programming team has developed and tested a “low graphics” version of the site which reduces page loading times by up to 75%.
 8. To improve analysis of actual user requirements, a user survey was conducted over a two month period during September-October 2005. Over 470 responses were received, from all regions, but with particularly strong interest from Central and Latin America. The survey indicated areas for re-design and further promotion of the site (most notably the French version). The expressed level of satisfaction with the portal content was high; satisfaction with the means of accessing material was slightly lower. Combined with the practical suggestions made by users to the survey, the portal team made some significant changes to the system design – with a new simplified set of topic pages being implemented in November – while access to Codex Standards has been improved by the creation of special links from the portal home page.

STRATEGY FOR SUSTAINABILITY AND DEVELOPMENT

9. The initial version of the portal was intended to demonstrate “proof of concept” – could data from official sources be assembled in a useable way; what level of use would such a system attract? This initial stage of development has been reviewed and this prototype stage evaluated as being broadly successful. However, the effort required to sustain data quality under the current system design is considerable.
10. The portal team has therefore submitted a successful request to the Standards and Trade Development Facility for funding to modify the system design, and enhance some of the systems which feed data to the portal, to improve the efficiency of the site in the longer term and reduce maintenance costs. The resulting project – worth around \$500,000 over the period 2006-2007 – is aimed to reduce running costs by 70%, while at the same time further improving data quality.
11. Demand for SPS-related information at national level remains high – pilot work working with national authorities to create national portal nodes has been undertaken and is under review.
12. A regional prototype has also been developed for Latin America based on user feedback, and an exploratory mission to Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, Peru, Guatemala and Mexico. <http://prisa.fao.org> - launched in April 2006 - is administered through FAO’s regional office in Santiago, and is intended to contain additional information beyond that included in the global system on contact addresses for institutions, references to relevant administrative forms, news, events and training opportunities.
13. However, different forms of collaboration are also being explored in several countries where commercial interests are actively trying to obtain information on, and make inputs to, the standard setting processes as these affect their sectors of activity. National portals supported by chambers of commerce, industry associations or producers groups are under development in Paraguay and Sri Lanka. The International portal on Food Safety, Animal and Plant Health is recognised as an important partner on these projects.
14. The long term vision for the role of the portal is to be the provider of core SPS-related information; the aim should then be that national stakeholders – who understand local requirements – should be able to draw on this core while developing information dissemination tools to meet local needs.
15. A second key role for the portal will be to continue to assist national authorities to make their own legislation, regulations or other official information available through the system. By doing so, countries can promote transparency and demonstrate national good governance on food safety, animal health and/or plant health issues.

16. The philosophy behind this work has always been to enhance and integrate existing locally-managed data sources, rather than require additional work (either locally or centrally) for documents to be uploaded to the portal (the latter tend not to prove sustainable).
17. Here work can involve some or all of the following:
 - compiling an inventory of all relevant food safety, animal and plant health regulations;
 - running a workshop for all involved in producing or using SPS-related information relevant to the country (the objective is to identify major data sources, responsibilities for maintenance, and highlight local *Biosecurity* issues);
 - collecting information on existing digital content, including responsibility for maintenance and identifying any key texts which are not available electronically;
 - planning and carrying out tasks needed to make this information available (digitising, adding additional metadata to websites, etc); and
 - harvesting information from national sources, and publicising the availability of newly-posted information with key trading partners.
18. One key benefit of this work with national authorities is that the *process* of identifying materials for inclusion in the portal highlights gaps and outstanding issues in the regulatory framework within the country, which links into FAO's *Biosecurity Capacity Needs Assessment* methodology.
19. Work is planned with up to 8 countries in 2006/7 to assess Biosecurity Capacity Needs – with the generous support of the Government of Norway – and the information collection and dissemination aspects are underpinned by the International Portal on Food Safety, Animal and Plant Health.
20. For further information on ways in which the portal can help improve access to Codex or other data sources, or on capacity building activities associated with SPS-related information management, please contact:

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