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codex alimentarius commission



FOOD AND AGRICULTURE
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JOINT FAO/WHO FOOD STANDARDS PROGRAMME

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THE INTERNATIONAL PORTAL ON FOOD SAFETY, ANIMAL AND PLANT HEALTH: PROGRESS IN 2006/2007 (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>. This has continued to develop in the period 2006/2007.

2. As previously noted, the portal is a practical tool for researchers, policy makers, the private sector and others to answer a wide range of SPS-related questions, to:

- 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 2007-2008.

ABOUT THE SYSTEM

5. The portal currently (May 2007) 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 of the system continues to be encouraging. The number of daily page views (excluding crawlers) has stabilised at an average of around 11 000 per day (May 2007). Around 600 documents are downloaded each day. Although this represents fewer page views than the previous high point of 2006, the numbers of documents consulted remains constant.

STRATEGY FOR SUSTAINABILITY AND DEVELOPMENT

A: EFFICIENT MAINTENANCE AND SYNERGIES

7. The portal team has been implementing a project funded by the Standards and Trade Development Facility 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 – aims to reduce running costs by 70%, while at the same time further improving data quality. This is nearing completion, although collaboration with some partners (notably OIE) has been slowed by global pre-occupation with Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza during this period.

8. Further work remains with some of the other main providers of information, where the adoption of new ‘web services’ technology and syndication of material will help further improve updating of the system.

9. The team continues to identify new data sets for inclusion in the portal. Currently under development, for instance, are data sets extracted from recent JMPR Evaluation reports to allow the portal to show registered uses (application method, recommended pre-harvest interval) for some of the leading pesticides, easily searchable by country and commodity, which will provide a value-adding service beyond publishing the whole evaluation in a PDF file on the web (which tend to be large and somewhat unwieldy files).

10. The team also continue to look for synergies with national projects funded by STDF, where there are opportunities to incorporate further data sets, or include the use of the portal (along with other key SPS-related information resources) in training or capacity building events.

B: EXPLOITING THE PORTAL

11. Today, the International Portal on Food safety, Animal and Plant health is essentially a mature system in terms of the technology used. However, there remains a significant challenge - to take the tool which has been developed and promote its wider use with key target groups (policy makers, sector-based trading organisations, academic researchers, etc) in developing countries.

12. One very positive development during 2006 was the running of a series of pilot workshops - in Moscow (for former CIS countries), Bangkok and Brazzaville, jointly with the Codex secretariat - to ‘demystify’ the Codex website and the various related information sources. In addition to explaining Codex procedures, and the various data sources available, this included a session on relevant search strategies using Codex and non-Codex sources, targeted at actual local/regional food safety issues.

13. The pilot workshops were principally targeted at academics involved in teaching Masters or similar level courses on a range of food safety, consumer protection, biological risk management and international trade and development subjects. Discussions also covered the possibility of extending this to a self-financing summer school researching into SPS topics.

14. The team has also developed a set of training materials to promote the use of the portal and similar information systems particularly in the area of risk assessment

15. The long term vision for the role of the portal continues to be as a 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.

16. 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.

17. 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).

18. 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.

19. 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.

20. Work is ongoing in a number of countries during 2006/7 to assess Biosecurity Capacity Needs – with the generous support of the Government of Norway – and the information collection and dissemination aspects can be supported by the International Portal on Food Safety, Animal and Plant Health.

21. 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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