

# codex alimentarius commission



FOOD AND AGRICULTURE  
ORGANIZATION  
OF THE UNITED NATIONS

WORLD  
HEALTH  
ORGANIZATION



JOINT OFFICE: Viale delle Terme di Caracalla 00100 ROME Tel: 39 06 57051 www.codexalimentarius.net Email: codex@fao.org Facsimile: 39 06 5705 4593

**Agenda Item 6**

**CRD 2  
May 2005**

## **JOINT FAO/WHO FOOD STANDARDS PROGRAMME CODEX COMMITTEE ON FRESH FRUITS AND VEGETABLES**

*Twelfth Session  
Mexico City, Mexico, 16 - 20 May 2005*

*To be held at "Sala Magna" of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mexico City, Mexico,  
from Monday, 16 May at 10:00 to Friday 20 May 2005*

**FAO AND WHO ACTIVITIES IN THE AREA OF FOOD TERRORISM  
(paper prepared by the Codex Secretariat in collaboration with FAO and WHO)**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The 11<sup>th</sup> Session of the Codex Committee on Fresh Fruits and Vegetables (Mexico City, September 2003) agreed to consider bioterrorism in the context of work of the Codex Committee on Fresh Fruits and Vegetables. In this regard, some delegations expressed concerns on the possible effects on the international trade of fresh fruits and vegetables that could derive from the entry in force of the legislations for preparedness and response to bioterrorism. Other delegations stated that they could not intervene in the discussion as they did have neither the mandate nor the necessary information. The Committee noted that information on relevant activities carried out by FAO and WHO could be presented at the next Session of the Committee by the Codex Secretariat<sup>1</sup>.

### **FAO AND WHO ACTIVITIES ON TERRORISM THREAT TO FOODS**

#### **FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION OF THE UNITED NATIONS (FAO)**

In recent times, increased attention is being given to the possibility of a terrorist threat where the vehicle might be food. The development of means to prevent, and systems to respond to this threat are consequential to the continual strengthening of national food safety systems.

Initiatives undertaken need to be administered in a practical, sustainable manner taking into account the local situation in each country and be proportionate to the risk. It is appropriate to take action to reduce the likelihood and impact of any incident which may threaten consumer's health. It should be recognized that the ability of a country to react and cope with a food terrorism incident, depends on the capacity within the food industry and the resources/infrastructure of government-led food safety programmes. FAO promotes the strengthening of national capacity to deal with all "food safety emergencies" which would include accidental as well as deliberate cases of food contamination, resulting in reduced level of consumer protection.

#### Possible FAO support:

Bearing this in mind, FAO continues to work with Member countries in strengthening programmes on sustainable food production and food safety and quality. The essence of the approach is to strengthen key aspects of food safety management programmes, and government controls over the food supply.

<sup>1</sup> ALINORM 04/27/35, paras. 3 & 93.

In this context, FAO provides assistance to member countries through targeting aspects of national food control programmes along the food chain that enhance the ability to respond in an emergency situation. FAO supports the development of aspects of the food control system which are an integral component of food industry and government programmes.

This, among others, include:

- Ensuring a well coordinated food inspection programme, - suitable registers, risk-based inspection programmes, proper trained inspectorate, licensing system, suitable import/export controls;
- Establishment of a national framework for responding to a major contamination of the food supply which fosters collaboration between the food industry and the government agencies;
- Provision of training on crisis management to the food industry to cope with natural, accidental and deliberate contamination of food;
- Quality assurance in food laboratories;
- Assistance in the development of an international system of information exchange in the event of an emergency;

In addition, FAO has developed a guidance document entitled “*Food Safety Guidance in Emergency Situations*” to assist those responsible for planning and overseeing food operations, especially in emergency situations, to recognize aspects of their function that influence food safety and to guide them in minimizing risk of foodborne illness. This document is available from the right hand side of the following page: [www.fao.org/es/esn/food/foodquality\\_en.stm](http://www.fao.org/es/esn/food/foodquality_en.stm)

Furthermore, FAO and WHO recently launched the International Food Safety Authorities Network (INFOSAN), a joint initiative aimed at promoting the exchange of food safety information and improving collaboration among food safety authorities at national and international levels. INFOSAN includes a food safety emergency component with the intent to facilitate information exchange in the event of a food safety emergency with a regional/international impact.

### **WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION<sup>2</sup> (WHO)**

There is an increasing demand on WHO to provide global leadership in response to health emergencies. As recently acknowledged by WHO and its member states in a series of World Health Assembly and Regional Committee resolutions, adequate support to countries and the international community during public health emergencies requires a scaling up of WHO capacities and performance at all levels – headquarters, regional offices, and country offices. The need for such improvements takes on added urgency in view of the new reporting mechanisms and obligations that will come in force with the revised International Health Regulations. These will require a rapid, effective, predictable and co-ordinated response to health emergencies across WHO, including those related to food in international trade. Moreover, outbreaks and other health emergencies are nearly always high-profile events with heavy media coverage and potential political dimensions, placing all parts of WHO under the spotlight and creating further pressure to ensure an efficient response. WHO needs to develop and make operational a strategic framework to address the threats posed by public health emergencies in ways that strengthen collective global health security.

To ensure a seamless response during emergencies, WHO headquarters, regional offices and country offices need to work as one. The value of such collaboration has clearly been demonstrated by WHO's performance during responses to recent emergencies such as the Asian Tsunami, SARS, Ebola, meningitis and avian influenza.

---

<sup>2</sup> Further details on WHO activities in this area can be found at: <http://www.who.int/topics/bioterrorism/en/>, including publications such as “*Terrorist Threats to Food - Guidelines for Establishing and Strengthening Prevention and Response Systems*”. For the time being this publication is only available in English.

Key strategic activities in this approach include:

- Establishment of the WHO Strategic Health Operations Centre and Regional Operations Centres, innovations that support a WHO-wide rapid and comprehensive response to emergencies of international concern. These facilities provides an environment for secure communications and coordination within WHO, with member states and with technical partners in external networks.
- Coordination and, where appropriate, integration of activities among key WHO programmes to ensure that a broad range of emergencies can be addressed, including those involving natural disasters, chemical, food, and radiological incidents as well as outbreaks of emerging and epidemic-prone diseases.
- Regionalisation of key aspects of the response platform to the six WHO Regional Offices to ensure more rapid and regionally relevant communication activities
- Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for emergency response (e.g. information management, human resource management, IT & communications) linked to a WHO-wide Major Event Plan and upgrading of operational and field logistics support, logistics mobility, and mechanisms for strategic stockpiling etc.
- A WHO-wide electronic Event Management System (EMS) which will fully exploit WHO's IT Backbone (Global Private Network) as well as providing real-time information to Member States and technical partners.
- Expansion and strengthening of key external technical networks such as the Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network (GOARN), CHEMINET for chemical emergencies and REMPAN for radiological emergencies in cooperation with IAEA.

In March 2003, WHO and its Regional Offices took the first steps in establishing INFOSAN. Through WHO entry points usually located in the Ministry of Health, WHO Representatives have requested the official designation of one or more INFOSAN Focal Points and one INFOSAN Emergency Contact Point. Only one emergency contact point has been requested per country in order to facilitate rapid and reliable communication with governments in cases where timeliness is critical. However, it should be noted that depending on the situation, the INFOSAN Emergency Contact Point role may delegate the responsibility for communication with WHO and other Member States to another person for particular incidents on a temporary basis.

INFOSAN is intended to be an information network for the dissemination of important information about global food safety issues. In addition to the WHO Food Safety Newsletter published every two months, examples of information that might be disseminated through INOFOSAN include: acrylamide in food (June 2002), WHO's 20 Questions on GM foods (October 2002), WHO's report on terrorist threats to food (Jan 2003), food safety aspects of SARS (April 2003), semicarbazide in infant foods (September 2003), and *E. sakazakii* in powdered milk (February 2004).

The INFOSAN Focal Points are expected to disseminate INFOSAN information to interested parties and stakeholders. While it is desirable to have a single INFOSAN Focal Point, several Focal Points may be identified in a country if responsibilities for food safety authorities are located in several agencies. Using a broad definition for *food safety authorities*, such authorities may be involved in food legislation, risk assessment, food control and management, food inspection services, laboratory services for monitoring and surveillance, and food safety information, education and communication, across the so-called farm-to-fork continuum. Therefore INFOSAN Focal Points may be located in several ministries, such as ministries of health, commerce, agriculture and trade. See figure below for an example of how this may be structured in a country with multiple agencies involved.

INFOSAN EMERGENCY CONTACT POINTS are expected to alert food safety authorities to foodborne disease outbreaks or food contamination events of international public health significance. Clearly, reliable and authoritative information on food emergencies is essential as the basis not only for prevention and response measures but also maintaining consumer confidence in the food supply. Relevant examples from the past might include the Chernobyl accident (1986), the dioxin contamination of animal-derived food in Belgium (1997), and the BSE outbreak and ban on feeding materials in the United Kingdom (1996). Potential future terrorist incidents would likely be notified under this network. INFOSAN EMERGENCY will be activated only during major international incidents involving the imminent risk of serious injury or death to consumers.

The INFOSAN EMERGENCY Contact Point will be expected to accept some notification and response responsibility and to facilitate the communication of urgent messages during food safety emergencies. The Contact Point should also be able to report on behalf of the government in the case of an emergency. Because of the potential sensitivity of the information exchanged, communication on this network would be considered confidential. The INFOSAN EMERGENCY Contact Point will be automatically part of the INFOSAN network and be kept informed about more routine food safety related activities. INFOSAN EMERGENCY will be closely linked to the GOARN Network (<http://www.who.int/csr/sars/goarn/en/index.html>) at both the national and international levels.

On 11 October 2004, the Food Safety Department (FOS) of WHO officially inaugurated the International Food Safety Authorities Network (INFOSAN), including its emergency component (INFOSAN EMERGENCY). At present about 140 countries have designated INFOSAN Focal Points and INFOSAN EMERGENCY Contact Points. Further efforts are underway to encourage the remaining WHO Member States to designate persons for the network.

In January 2003<sup>2</sup>, WHO issued a document entitled “*Terrorism Threat to Foods: Guide for Establishing or Strengthening Prevention and Response Systems*”. The document is intended to raise awareness of government authorities to this dramatically different type of threat to the food supply and is available at [http://www.who.int/foodsafety/publications/fs\\_management/terrorism/en/](http://www.who.int/foodsafety/publications/fs_management/terrorism/en/). This publication responds to increasing concern in WHO’s Member States that chemical, biological or radionuclear agents might be used deliberately to harm civilian populations and that food might be a vehicle for disseminating such agents. The purpose of the document is to provide policy guidance to Member States for integrating consideration of deliberate acts of sabotage of food into existing prevention and response programmes. This requires strengthened systems including disease outbreak surveillance and investigation, precautionary measures and emergency response systems. Chapter 1 introduces the problem and places it in the context of other food safety emergencies. Chapter 2 outlines the preventive aspects that can be incorporated into food safety programmes to meet the new threat of food sabotage. Chapter 3 addresses the surveillance, preparedness and response elements specific to food safety, to facilitate their inclusion in existing national emergency response plans and to achieve balance between threats to food safety and other threats. In Chapter 4, the current activities of WHO in this regard and a proposal for strengthening collaboration to assure more effective alert and response systems for food terrorism are presented. Establishment and strengthening of food safety programmes will both increase Member States capacity to reduce the increasing burden of foodborne illness and help them to address the threat of food terrorism.

The Guidance document makes reference to the potential collaboration, in the event of a terrorist threat to food, with other UN international organizations including FAO. The Guidance document does not include threats to water supply or threats to animal or plant health. However, when discussing possible contaminants that may be used in an attack, agricultural chemicals, vaccines, may be considered and therefore this overlaps with the animal and plant health programmes.

In addition to this Guidance document, A guide for INFOSAN Emergency Contact Points has been drafted and will be sent to governments for comment after the World Health Assembly in May 2005 has reviewed and decided upon the revised International Health Regulations which currently include the requirement for mandatory reporting of food safety incidents with international implications. Development of secure Website for INFOSAN Emergency Contact Points is ongoing. Training courses for INFOSAN Emergency Contact Points are envisioned in the future. In regard to this work, WHO would like to acknowledge the support from the governments of Australia, Ireland, Spain, United Kingdom and the United States of America

In response to the recent earthquake and tsunami in Southeast Asia, WHO prepared a guidance document on food safety in aftermath natural disasters that is available at [http://w3.whosea.org/EN/Section23/Section1108/Section1835/Section1864\\_8326.htm](http://w3.whosea.org/EN/Section23/Section1108/Section1835/Section1864_8326.htm). The guide is intended to provide public health and other authorities with guidance on key food safety issues to be considered in such disaster situations; remind authorities of the need to restore and maintain basic support for food safety infrastructure; heighten their vigilance against the introduction of new foodborne risks; and, serve as a quick reference to those involved in providing emergency food aid, such as refugee camp managers and food distributions; and, provide guidance for the development of simple messages to anyone, including ordinary consumers, involved in food preparation in disaster areas.

## **CODEX WORK RELEVANT TO TERRORISM THREAT TO FOODS**

In view of the current approach and activities of the parent Organizations and the mandate of the Codex Alimentarius Commission namely to protect consumers' health and ensure fair practices in the food trade, the Commission has developed several texts aimed at (among others) addressing unwarranted action against safe food supply. These include the *Principles and Guidelines for the Exchange of Information in Food Safety Emergency Situations (CAC/GL 19-1995)* as well as other texts, of indirect or general application, such as the *Recommended International Code of Practice - General Principles of Food Hygiene and the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) System and Guidelines for its Application (CAC/RCP 1-1969)* or the *Codex Guidelines Levels for Radionuclides in Foods following accidental nuclear contamination for use in international trade (CAC/GL 5-1989)* currently under revision.

The ongoing activities of Codex include development of draft principles for the application of traceability/product tracing in the context of food import and export inspection and certification systems (pending approval of new work by the Commission), which may lead to additional guidance to better protect safe food supply.