

# codex alimentarius commission



FOOD AND AGRICULTURE  
ORGANIZATION  
OF THE UNITED NATIONS



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**Agenda Item 3**

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## **JOINT FAO/WHO FOOD STANDARDS PROGRAMME FAO/WHO REGIONAL COORDINATING COMMITTEE FOR EUROPE**

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### **ACTIVITIES OF FAO AND WHO COMPLEMENTARY TO THE WORK OF THE CODEX ALIMENTARIUS COMMISSION**

#### **FAO/WHO/EC DISCUSSION PAPER**

#### **“COMPATIBILITY OF DATA REPORTING FORMATS USED BY FAO/WHO INTERNATIONAL RISK ASSESSMENT BODIES, EUROPEAN INSTITUTIONS SUCH AS THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION AND SCIENTIFIC BODIES SUCH AS THE EUROPEAN FOOD SAFETY AUTHORITY FOR RISK ASSESSMENT”**

##### **1. Background**

The risk assessments performed by the Joint FAO/WHO Expert Committee on Food Additives (JECFA), the Joint FAO/WHO Meeting on Pesticide Residues (JMPR) and the Joint FAO/WHO meeting on microbiological risk assessment (JEMRA), as well as ad hoc Expert Consultations (e.g. on biotechnology) serve as the scientific foundation for national and international food standards and are of increasing importance within the Codex Alimentarius Commission and the World Trade Organisation.

The enlarged European Union, which comprises 25 member countries, is the world's largest importer/exporter of food products. The new European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) is the Scientific Body of the European Commission responsible for the provision of risk assessments on all matters linked to food and feed safety, including animal health and welfare and plant protection.

Currently, there is a lack of harmonization at the European and the international level of the formats for reporting foodborne diseases and chemical and microbiological food contamination data. In this context, there is a need to make compatible reporting formats at the regional and international level to make data on foodborne diseases and data on chemical and microbiological food contamination more widely comparable and accessible for risk assessment.

The FAO /WHO Pan European Conference on Food Safety and Quality in 2002 recommended to improve and/or establish national and regional networks for surveillance of foodborne diseases and monitoring of chemical and microbiological contamination in food, and that these networks should be linked, coordinated and open to all European countries. The need to harmonize data reporting systems across Europe was stressed.

The issue was also raised at the 23<sup>th</sup> Session of the CCEURO in 2002 where the Committee noted the need stated by participating countries of the WHO Surveillance Programme for Control of Foodborne Infections and Intoxications in Europe to coordinate these WHO surveillance activities with those of DG Sanco in the EC and possibly with the MRA activities of EFSA."

##### **2. Existing systems to collect data on food contamination and foodborne disease in the European Region**

Notwithstanding the need to broaden the debate of data collection systems both geographically and conceptually (including microbiological food contamination data), the following is a brief description of two existing systems focused on chemical food contamination data and foodborne disease data. Any future European initiatives in this area will have to be efficiently coordinated with other initiatives with a view of ensuring global applicability .

## 2.1 Global Environmental Monitoring System/ Food Contamination Monitoring Programme

Established in 1976, the Global Environment Monitoring System/Food Contamination Monitoring and Assessment Programme (GEMS/Food), has informed governments, the Codex Alimentarius Commission and other relevant institutions, as well as the public, on levels and trends of contaminants in food, their contribution to total human exposure, and significance with regard to public health and trade. GEMS/Food currently includes institutions located in over 75 countries. The GEMS-Food Programme in Europe was re-established in 2001 to address specific priorities and needs of the European Region and has the participation of 35 European countries.

The objectives of the GEMS/Food Programme are to collect, analyze and disseminate data on contaminants in foods and total diets. Systems and procedures have been developed to enable electronic data collection from collaborating national institutions. To aid these collections the Operational Programs for Analytical Laboratories (OPAL) software and a World Wide Web system for the dissemination of data to interested partners “Summary Information on Global Health Trends database” (SIGHT database) have been developed.

The GEMS/Food Programme in Europe has been providing training to European countries on the use of the Operational Programs for Analytical Laboratories (OPAL) software for the collection and submission of data.

The Codex Committee on Food Additives and Contaminants specifically requires that data on chemical contaminants be submitted in the GEMS/Food format. This facilitates the collection, collation and evaluation of such data within the Codex system because the electronic reporting manual for GEMS/Food is available in English, French and Spanish.

The FAO/WHO Pan European Conference on Food Safety and Quality in 2002 stressed that consideration should be given to the development across Europe of harmonized data reporting formats for chemical contaminants in food as the first step in developing consistent and comparable assessments for both health and standards-setting purposes, including Codex Alimentarius work. In this regard, the Conference recommended that the GEMS/Food data structure could be considered as the default if no other format is available.

The Advisory Committee of the GEMS/Food Programme in Europe in 2001 recognized the need to promote the coordination of national monitoring programs and activities of WHO, FAO and UNEP with the monitoring programs and initiatives of the European Commission (EC) to promote synergy and avoid unnecessary duplication of efforts<sup>1</sup>. This has been further discussed at the EU working groups on integrated monitoring of dioxins and PCBs and Heavy Metals in the framework of the development of the European Environment and Health Strategy<sup>2</sup>.

## 2.2 WHO Surveillance Programme for Control of Foodborne Infections and Intoxications in Europe

The WHO Surveillance Programme for Control of foodborne Infections and Intoxications in Europe was launched almost 25 years ago to provide countries with support in the prevention and control of foodborne diseases. The Programme has 51 participating countries and has been providing essential data for hazard identification and for analysis of trends in the Region.

The FAO/WHO Pan European Conference on Food Safety and Quality in 2002 recommended to improve the reporting of foodborne diseases at the national level as well as to the WHO Surveillance Programme for Control of Foodborne Infections and Intoxications in Europe and to strengthen national capabilities to perform microbiological risk assessments.

The experts who prepare risk assessments, the expert consultations that review the assessments as well as the Codex Committee on Food Hygiene all have identified gaps in data and current knowledge and have stressed the strong need for additional information, especially from surveillance.

The last meeting of the Advisory Committee of the WHO Surveillance Programme for Control of foodborne diseases in Europe in 2002 identified priorities which included:

- Promotion of the collection of data from outbreaks that have been thoroughly investigated epidemiologically. Such investigations should also include information on food contamination

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.euro.who.int/foodsafety/Chemical/20020905\\_2](http://www.euro.who.int/foodsafety/Chemical/20020905_2)

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.environmentandhealth.org/twgim/twgim\\_home.php](http://www.environmentandhealth.org/twgim/twgim_home.php)

levels and other microbiological parameters for microbiological risk assessment. In providing data from such investigations outbreak investigation units can provide essential information for dose-response models, which are essential parts of risk assessments.

In line with this the questionnaire for reporting foodborne incidents to the WHO Surveillance Programme for Control of Foodborne Diseases in Europe is being revised to consider the inclusion of quantitative and qualitative information that could be used for risk assessment.

- Coordination with European and international networks and institutions such as the Community Reference Laboratory for Zoonoses, ENTERNET, Basic Surveillance Network, EFSA and other WHO Programmes such as the Global Salmonella-Surv to share information and avoid duplication of work.

In this context WHO has been invited as an observer to collaborate with the zoonosis group in EFSA to discuss the new templates for reporting zoonoses data (this group is in charge of preparing the annual zoonosis report in the European Union). Future collaborative work will focus on the templates to report food-borne outbreaks, antimicrobial resistance, and demographic data.

### **3. The potential for improved harmonization**

#### **3.1 Compatibility of data reporting formats used by European surveillance and monitoring programmes to provide data for risk assessment**

There is a need to promote the compatibility of data reporting formats of foodborne diseases and chemical and microbiological food contamination used by the European surveillance and monitoring systems. This will make information on food contamination monitoring and on foodborne diseases more compatible and valuable for risk assessment and other scientific use as well as improved food safety management.

The GEMS/Food Programme data structure facilitates the collection, collation and evaluation of such data within Codex. Inconsistencies in different database structures can be resolved and translation programs should be prepared so that data in various formats can be easily inter-converted. This format has been used by several European countries and the data structure should be shared and discussed with the relevant panels at the EFSA (e.g. panels on contaminants and pesticides).

Currently there is an ongoing collaboration between the WHO Surveillance Programme for Control of Foodborne Diseases and the EFSA group for zoonosis in the process of the development of templates for data reporting and particularly in view of the future requirements for reporting on the foodborne outbreak by the zoonosis directive, so that compatible forms for the report of foodborne outbreaks are used across the European Region. It is necessary to maintain this collaborative effort in order to generate compatible formats for the reporting of data that eventually will be used for risk assessment.

#### **3.2 Future collaboration between national, regional and international institutions**

Cooperation of the national institutions in the European Region to facilitate the process of making compatible reporting formats for surveillance and monitoring data is essential. Further input from collaborating national institutions is necessary to improve the systems and procedures that have been developed to facilitate electronic data collection.

There is a need to continue strengthening the collaboration between international risk assessment bodies, European Institutions, and other Scientific bodies such as the new European Food Safety Authority and national Food Safety Agencies, and to fit such collaboration into the broader international, global work on food safety data collection.

A consultative process on the provision of scientific advice has been initiated in 2003 to improve the quality, quantity, transparency and timeliness of FAO/WHO scientific advice related to food. This process will include consideration of principles used by other national, regional and international risk assessment bodies, including the coordination with EFSA activities and considerations will be important in the development of improved systems for the provision of scientific advice.