

codex alimentarius commission



FOOD AND AGRICULTURE
ORGANIZATION
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WORLD
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ORGANIZATION



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JOINT FAO/WHO FOOD STANDARDS PROGRAMME

CODEX ALIMENTARIUS COMMISSION

Twenty-sixth session, FAO Headquarters, Rome, Italy, 30 June – 7 July 2003

THE INTERNATIONAL PORTAL FOR FOOD SAFETY, PLANT, AND ANIMAL HEALTH (IPFSAPH) (Information paper)

THE NEED FOR THE PORTAL

1. The changing patterns of food and agricultural production, greater attention to the environmental impact of agriculture, emergence of new technologies and potential contaminants, increase in international trade, and a heightened consumer awareness of food safety and animal health issues have all combined to increase interest in global sanitary and phytosanitary measures.
2. This interest comes from international agencies; national trade, agriculture, food safety, environment and consumer protection services; international trading partners; and private sector organizations. Each requires reliable information on standards, regulations, scientific evaluations, and other supporting information to make decisions on trade-related issues or to prepare relevant regulations or measures.
3. Despite the broad level of interest, obtaining accurate and current information can be difficult. A user may need to search the websites of a number of different international standard setting bodies to retrieve all the relevant information on a particular commodity or on a specific topic that transverses traditional sectors. The same scenario is repeated at the national level where standards, regulations, and related information may be spread across the websites of several agencies.
4. There are two common problems: 1) information may be difficult to locate, and 2) it may not always be clear which source represents the official position on a given subject. This is compounded where information is relevant to multiple sectors or more than one country.
5. At the other extreme, internet access remains problematic in some countries and information has not yet been transferred to electronic media, so trading partners must go through a lengthy and expensive process of contacting each trading partner directly to obtain standards and import information.

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THE PURPOSE OF THE PORTAL

6. Based on the above considerations, FAO is leading an interagency initiative, intending to involve the relevant international agencies and standard setting bodies to develop an internet-based portal - the International Portal on Food Safety, Animal and Plant Health (IPFSAPH) - which will permit an authoritative search for current standards, regulations and other relevant official materials from a single access point.

7. Through the main standard setting bodies (the Codex Alimentarius Commission [Codex], International Plant Protection Convention [IPPC] and the Office International des Épizooties [OIE]), FAO is also seeking to mobilise national support to make national sanitary and phytosanitary information available through the IPFSAPH.

DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS

Ownership

8. The key design consideration for the IPFSAPH has been to ensure that data ownership is retained by the relevant agency or national body.

9. To date, systems created to collect and disseminate sanitary and phytosanitary information have had only limited success. Third party attempts to interpret and re-present official materials usually fail as users need to revert to the original source to be confident that essential components have not been lost. On the other hand, systems for countries to publish materials have been undermined by users failing to supply (or provide updates for) the requested data. Though the reasons for this are complex, the inconvenience of compliance and the perception that compliance yields few benefits to countries are recognised as contributing factors.

10. With this in mind, the IPFSAPH project has taken as a primary objective **to avoid duplication of effort and minimise the cost of participation** by linking to existing sites wherever possible. This applies to international standard setting bodies as well as national government agencies. In this way, data owners remain fully responsible for maintenance and liable for the quality of the content displayed. At the same time, the portal offers publication facilities for any countries without pre-existing websites to allow them to post information which would not otherwise be available electronically.

Maintenance

11. To facilitate these arrangements without major maintenance costs, the process of linking must be automated as far as possible – simply including links to current web pages would mean a majority of broken links within a short period (manually entered links ‘break’ when source web sites are redesigned).

12. One way of achieving this long term maintenance is through the exchange of metadata – formal descriptions of the content on the source sites which also include the current address of the webpage to be viewed. For instance in the plant health sector, member countries are required by international convention (IPPC) to provide certain information to the International Phytosanitary Portal (IPP). Based on a mapping of information types in the IPP, this information is also viewed automatically from the IPFSAPH; when the IPP source changes, the version visible from the IPFSAPH also changes.

Language

13. The use of a common formal scheme for describing materials on the IPFSAPH and in the source websites is also useful for handling material in multiple languages. The portal will make all materials available in the original language, but will also ensure that the resource is described using a controlled vocabulary in one of five core languages (English, French, Spanish, Chinese and Arabic). Translation of the controlled vocabulary will permit keyword searches to be performed in each of the five languages.

CURRENT STATUS OF THE PROJECT AND TIMETABLE

14. The project is being implemented in the following stages:

Develop an IPFSAPH prototype and test with users

15. The IPFSAPH project is currently testing a prototype version of the portal user interface based on a limited set of accessible content. This testing has already begun in the food safety area starting with a group of food safety officials from Central and Eastern Europe (following a regional food safety meeting in Slovakia in March 2003) to provide feedback on the procedure for inputting and accessing information.

Include sample international and national data to illustrate potential uses

16. At the same time, informal discussions are ongoing with international agency partners on enabling access to standards and supporting materials through the portal. Bilateral discussions are also underway with representatives from countries involved in the import of food and agricultural products regarding making national regulations available systematically through the portal.

Formalise interagency collaboration and management of the portal

17. In parallel with the above steps, work is underway to formalise the interagency collaboration and management of the portal. Initially, FAO will remain responsible for providing the software system, administration, and maintenance of the system. An interagency task force is envisaged to guide portal development from prototype to the first release version and beyond. The first meeting is planned to take place in conjunction with the 26th session of the Codex Alimentarius Commission (Rome, 30 June- 7 July 2003). A meeting with information management specialists from the participating agencies to facilitate the actual exchange of information is planned after the initial task force meeting. A second meeting of the task force is planned to review the first release of the portal and commit to longer-term support arrangements.

Launch Version 1.0 of the IPFSAPH

18. A formal launch is expected to occur in early 2004.

Extend IPFSAPH scope

19. The formal launch will be supported by a programme of capacity building integrated into existing capacity building efforts by the various agencies, with further programmes to be well coordinated between agencies. This will include:

- building awareness and understanding of the benefits of information exchange;
- development of national strategies for the exchange of official information;
- assistance in the development of computing facilities and information management capacity to support information exchange;
- human resource development and training sessions for national authorities on the use of the portal and data input and editing functionality; and
- tailored training sessions to targeted audiences of end users on the use of the portal.

20. Through this capacity building program, it is envisaged that arrangements can be made with other countries for automatic and/or manual loading of their national information.

MAKING NATIONAL FOOD SAFETY REGULATIONS AVAILABLE THROUGH THE IPFSAPH

21. Although there are no formal national information sharing commitments within the existing Codex regulations, countries which make available their standards, regulations, and other formal texts relating to food safety will benefit through increased viability of international trade. With an increase in transparency, it is also possible to anticipate some reduction in the effort required to monitor and control trade at national points of entry, and should help increase the number of accepted shipments into that country. Countries who are in the process of formulating regulations and standards will also benefit from the ability to view the various approaches taken by others to address similar issues.

22. While this portal offers a useful compilation of material representing the international regulatory framework on food safety, animal and plant health, the portal will only be truly successful with national participation through the making available of relevant regulations and formal texts for access by trading partners.

23. Activities are currently being planned in conjunction with the Codex Alimentarius Commission to mobilise support for inclusion of national food safety information in the portal.

24. In the meantime, for further information on the IPFSAPH, please contact:

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