PRINCIPLES AND GUIDELINES FOR THE EXCHANGE OF INFORMATION IN FOOD SAFETY EMERGENCY SITUATIONS

CAC/GL 19-1995

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1　PREAMBLE

When a food safety emergency arises, in order to minimize potential adverse public health effects, it is essential to communicate the nature and extent of the emergency to all relevant parties, including action taken by the exporting country, as expeditiously as possible to ensure prompt action can be taken to manage the food safety emergency in importing countries. This must be done in a manner that avoids unwarranted action against unaffected batches of the food, or other foods from the country involved in the food safety emergency, or other countries. The global nature of food trade requires that the communication occur as rapidly as possible among all relevant competent authorities of affected countries.

The Guidelines are consistent, and should be read in conjunction, with relevant Codex texts, such as the *Principles and Guidelines for National Food Control Systems* (CAC/GL 82-2013) and the *Guidelines for Food Import Control Systems* (CAC/GL 47-2003). In addition, documents and guidance material developed by FAO and WHO are valuable resources[1], in particular the FAO/WHO guide for application of risk analysis principles and procedures during food safety emergencies[2] and the FAO/WHO framework for developing national food safety emergency response plans[3].

The International Food Safety Authorities Network[4] (INFOSAN) is a mechanism for information exchange to ensure food safety authorities are aware of events that may have international implications.

2.　SCOPE

These Guidelines provide guidance for responding to food safety emergencies. They apply to situations where the competent authority becomes aware of a food safety emergency, and action must be undertaken to communicate the risks associated with the emergency. Due to trade globalization and increased import/export operations, it is possible that the management of a food safety emergency is the responsibility of more than one competent authority, and timely and coordinated collaboration among all relevant stakeholders, including food business operators and consumers, is required to ensure an effective response. The guidance also applies to feed[5] whenever the use of the feed may result in unsafe food.

The Guidelines apply to a food safety emergency where the food safety hazard and food product has been specifically identified. They may also apply to situations where the food safety hazard has not been identified, but relevant scientific information suggests a link between consumption of a food and the appearance of serious health effects.

The Guidelines apply to food safety emergencies associated with imported or exported food or food that may potentially be imported or exported. The Guidelines may also apply to such emergencies where feed for food producing animals is implicated[6].

The Guidelines do not apply to import rejections caused by failure to comply with importing country requirements. These situations are covered in the Guidelines for the Exchange of Information between Countries on Rejections of Imported Food (CAC/GL 25-1997).

3　DEFINITIONS

Food Safety Emergency: A situation, whether accidental or intentional, that is identified by a competent authority as constituting a serious and as yet uncontrolled foodborne risk to public health that requires urgent action.
Food Safety Emergency Response: A process of assessing the risk, making risk management decisions, and communicating risks in the face of time constraints, and possible incomplete data and knowledge.

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[1] http://www.fao.org/food/food-safety-quality/publications-tools/food-safety-publications/en/

[2] http://www.fao.org/docrep/014/ba0092e/ba0092e00.pdf and http://www.who.int/foodsafety/publications/infosan/en/

[3] http://www.fao.org/docrep/013/i1686e/i1686e00.pdf and http://www.who.int/foodsafety/publications/infosan/en/

[4] http://www.who.int/foodsafety/areas_work/infosan/en/

[5] The term feed refers to both feed (feeding stuffs) and feed ingredients, as defined in the *Code of Practice on Good Animal Feeding* (CAC/RCP 54-2004).

[6] Provisions for emergency situations affecting animal feed are included in the *Code of Practice for Good Animal Feeding* (CAC/RCP 54-2004): Section 4.3.1 "Special conditions applicable to emergency situations".

4. PRINCIPLES

4.1 Many food safety emergencies have international implications and may be reportable to WHO under the International Health Regulations (2005)[7] (IHR) and INFOSAN. The exchange of information should follow the risk analysis principles recognized by the Codex Alimentarius[8] in the case of a food safety emergency or a situation where a food safety hazard has not been identified, but relevant scientific information suggests a link between consumption of a food and the appearance of serious health effects. Due to time constraints, it is recognised that risk management measures may have to be taken on the basis of limited information and before the completion of a full risk assessment.

4.2 Key principles include:

    a) A primary official contact point should be designated by each country involved in a food safety emergency to facilitate exchanges of information. Preparedness and response to food safety emergencies may require coordination between competent authorities responsible for different parts of the food chain and public health, depending on the nature and extent of the emergency.

    b) Information on the nature and extent of the food safety emergency, including a risk assessment when completed, should, where possible, be clearly and completely described by the relevant competent authorities. If the basis for the food safety emergency is related to the use of feed, the specific nature of the feed related problem and its impact on food safety should be indicated.

    c) In circumstances where the specific food safety hazard has not been precisely identified, any clear and substantial association between the consumption of a food and the appearance of serious public health effects should be provided by the competent authority.

    d) The exchange of information on food safety emergencies should be between official contact points designated by the competent authority in accordance with section 6.2. A channel providing the most rapid and effective information flow should be used. All relevant information should be exchanged in a mutually agreed language or a language used by Codex.

    e) A country detecting a food safety emergency should inform countries likely to be affected without delay utilizing existing mechanisms and international agreements (e.g. INFOSAN or IHR (2005), as appropriate). If the country detecting the emergency is not the exporting country, the exporting country must be notified as a matter of priority.

    f) All relevant information should be shared by the competent authority detecting a food safety emergency to enable all countries likely to be affected to take informed risk assessment, risk management and/or risk communication decisions.

    g) The competent authority should also provide clear, relevant, factual and timely information to relevant stakeholders.

    h) Information flow should be transparent and continue during all phases of the food safety emergency to enable continuous evaluation and refinement of the emergency response.

    i) Food should not be placed in international trade for the purpose of disposing of unsafe or unsuitable food as described in 3.2 of the Code of Ethics for International Trade in Food including Concessional and Food Aid Transactions (CAC/RCP 20-1979).

5. STAKEHOLDERS AND THEIR RESPECTIVE ROLES

5.1 Competent authorities

The competent authority is responsible for managing and communicating food safety emergencies in accordance with the principles outlined in paragraph 4.2.

Upon identification of a food safety emergency, the competent authority identifying the emergency should promptly communicate with official contact point(s) (e.g. the INFOSAN Emergency Contact Point) of the country and the appropriate competent authority of other countries likely to be affected. The competent authority responsible for coordinating the response should update countries receiving the affected food of action taken, as appropriate. The accuracy and veracity of the scientific and other information regarding a food safety emergency should be verified to assist the risk assessment, risk management and risk communication process. Any misinformation should be promptly corrected by competent authorities.

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[7] http://www.who.int/ihr/about/en/
[8] Working Principles for Risk analysis for Food Safety for Application by Governments (CAC/GL 62-2007).

The competent authority should provide industry, consumers and other stakeholders with information on the status of the food safety emergency. A communication plan, including multiple methods of providing such information on the relevant details, should be prepared and used. The information should, as relevant, include health effects on the most sensitive groups (children, elderly people and people with reduced immune system) and how the affected food/foods can be identified and handled in order to reduce further spreading of risk.

5.2 International Food Safety Authorities Network (INFOSAN)

The INFOSAN Emergency Contact Point is responsible for reporting urgent food safety events of potential international significance to the INFOSAN Secretariat. INFOSAN is the FAO/WHO network for the dissemination of important information about food safety issues globally. INFOSAN maintains a network of official contact points from national government authorities involved in food safety. This includes one Emergency Contact Point from the authority responsible for national food safety emergency response, and additional focal points from other national agencies involved in food safety (in accordance with section 6.2). During food safety incidents, INFOSAN liaises with relevant national authorities to collect, validate and if required, share factual information at the international level. INFOSAN should be considered a key information resource for support during emergencies. Many food safety emergencies have serious international implications and may also be reportable to WHO under the International Health Regulations (2005).

5.3 Food business operators

Food business operators have the primary responsibility for ensuring food safety and are thus responsible for contributing to the management of food safety emergencies related to their products. They are also responsible for having in place traceability systems capable of effective tracing of food lots and for providing timely and relevant information to the competent authorities and other relevant stakeholders, including customers and/or consumers, on matters of relevance for managing food safety emergencies[9]. They are also responsible for providing training or instruction to staff and for internal communication. These provisions also apply to feed business operators if the food safety emergency is associated with feed.

A food business operator should be able to readily provide information about what food it has, where it came from and to whom it has been supplied. The keeping of records that can be transmitted digitally and are searchable should be encouraged so as to facilitate the tracing of product through more complex distribution networks in a timely fashion.

5.4 Consumers

Consumers can safeguard their personal health by remaining informed of and following instructions from competent authorities related to food safety emergencies.

6 PROCESSES FOR FOOD SAFETY EMERGENCY RESPONSE

The relevant sections of the FAO/WHO guide for application of risk analysis principles and procedures during food safety emergencies provide additional guidance.

6.1 Food Safety Emergency Plan

The competent authority should develop a national food safety emergency plan indicating procedures to be followed in the case of a food safety emergency, including specific provisions relating to communication. The plan should also establish the responsibilities of all parties involved in the emergency situation with a view to managing the coordination arrangements among them. Useful guidance on establishing a food safety emergency plan can be found in the FAO/WHO framework for developing national food safety emergency response plans[10].

6.2 Designated official contact points for information exchange

Each country should designate a primary official contact point for food safety emergency situations, which can act as the national focal point for information exchange in such situations. Although the primary official contact point is the first contact, it is understood that, in a given food safety emergency, the competent authority may wish to designate a specific contact point for that emergency. Updated information on the primary official contact point should be provided to INFOSAN.

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[9] *Principles of Traceability/Product Training as a tool within a food inspection and certification system* (CAC/GL 60-2006)
[10] http://www.fao.org/docrep/013/i1686e/i1686e00.pdf

6.3   Level of food distribution

The competent authority should take account of whether the food or (as appropriate) feed involved has or is likely to have been distributed at the wholesale, retail or consumer level. They should also consider the quantity of food distributed, whether it may be in transit to a trading partner, and implement risk management and communication measures accordingly, including a notice of recall at one or more of these levels of food distribution. Useful guidance for this is available in the FAO/WHO guide for developing and improving national food recall systems[11].

In some cases, the affected food may not yet have entered an importing country, and risk management and communication measures of the importing country's competent authority will focus on the importers and border controls. However, in other cases, the food will have entered and been distributed within a country or transhipped to other countries, and risk management and communication measures by both the exporting and importing country competent authorities will need to be amended accordingly.

6.4   Information management

Given the global nature of food trade, the impact of a food safety emergency may be widespread. The competent authority of the country where the food safety emergency is identified should, to the best of its ability and in cooperation with other competent authorities, determine all potential recipient countries of the implicated food and all countries from which the potentially contaminated food or (when appropriate) feed or its ingredients was imported. All relevant information in relation to the food safety emergency should be provided to the competent authorities of the countries identified in this way.

Communication should be made by the most expedient means, as early as possible, and with verification of receipt by primary official contact points. Communications by telephone (of particular importance outside office hours at the receiving end) or electronic means should be considered in order to achieve early communication and to ensure that the competent authorities receive the message as quickly as possible.

In cases where the food safety hazard is associated with a specific food or foods, these foods should be identified in as much detail as available to facilitate the identification and location of the affected foods. In other cases, where a food safety hazard affects many different categories of foods and potentially involves a determined geographical area, all affected foods should be identified. If the food safety hazard is associated with feed, the feed should be clearly identified.

It is recognized that the initial information provided may often be incomplete, and it is therefore the responsibility of the country identifying the food safety emergency to ensure that the initial communication is supplemented by further notification(s), as and when more detailed information becomes available.

The Competent authority should also provide clear, relevant, updated, factual and timely communication on the status of the food safety emergency to all relevant stakeholders, using the media it considers appropriate.

6.5   Information to be exchanged

A standard format for the relevant information to be exchanged is recommended for use by both the importing and exporting countries. The competent authority will determine the nature and extent of information to be exchanged with respect to its national laws regarding protection of private information. A model standard format for information exchange in food safety emergencies is provided in the Annex.

6.6   Information flow

The information flow at the initial stages of the process will likely include presumptions and a level of precaution with regards to the measures implemented. This information should be refined as further detail on the nature of the food safety emergency becomes available. Communications between designated official contact points should be transparent and continue through all phases of the food safety emergency, from initial notification of the food safety problem including, whenever possible, details of any relevant risk assessments that have been used, through to notification of the resolution of the problem. This will enable countries to review their risk assessment, risk management and risk communication strategies as the situation changes.

6.8   Early warning systems

Consideration should be given to setting up early warning systems. The FAO Emergency Prevention System for Food Safety[12] (EMPRES Food Safety) may provide assistance in setting up such systems.

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[11] http://www.fao.org/docrep/017/i3006e/i3006e.pdf and www.who.int/foodsafety/publications/recall/en/
[12] http://www.fao.org/food/food-safety-quality/empres-food-safety/en/

STANDARD FORMAT FOR INFORMATION EXCHANGE IN FOOD SAFETY EMERGENCIES

The following constitutes the information that should be exchanged between competent authorities of both exporting and importing countries involved in a food safety emergency. Initial information exchange should occur as fast as possible, even if it is not complete. Further information can be exchanged as soon as it becomes available.

1.   **Nature of the food safety emergency**

The nature of the food safety hazard causing the food safety emergency should be described, and may include the following as appropriate:

- biological/microbiological contamination (specify organism or toxin of concern);

- chemical contamination (e.g. pesticides, drugs, industrial chemicals, environmental contaminants);

- physical contamination (e.g. foreign bodies);

- radionuclide contamination (specify radionuclide(s) of concern);

- undeclared allergen (the allergen should be explicitly named);

- other identified hazards (e.g. inherent chemicals in foods or produced through processing, processing/packaging faults);

- unknown agent (specify serious adverse health effects associated with consumption of specified foods).

In each of the above cases, the specific food safety hazard and its level or prevalence based on available information and, as appropriate, the sampling and methods of analysis used, and any assumptions made should be notified.

The nature and extent of any adverse health effects associated with a food safety emergency should be described, e.g. incubation period, severity, other epidemiological data.

2.   **Identification of foods or, as appropriate, feeds concerned**

The foods or feeds concerned should be described completely. The following information should be provided if available, as appropriate to the product:

- description and quantity of product(s), including brand, the name(s) of the product listed on the label, grade, preservation method (e.g. chilled or frozen) and shelf life;

- type and size of package(s);

- lot identification, including lot code, dates of production and processing, and identification of premises where last packed or processed;

- other identification marks/stamps (e.g. bar codes, UPC codes);

- name and address of producer, manufacturer, packer, seller, exporter or importer, as appropriate;

- pictorial image;

- export certificate(s) reference number(s), official name and mark.

An indication of the countries to which the product has been exported should also be provided, as soon as it is known, to enable countries to quickly identify whether they are likely to be affected, and to help locate the affected foods.

3.   **Affected or potentially affected population group(s)**

Food safety emergencies may predominantly affect certain segments of a population, e.g. children, pregnant women, immune-compromised persons or the elderly. In such instances, this information should be communicated.

4.   **Shipping and related information**

Information on the following should be provided if available:

- exporter name and contact information;

- importer name and contact information;

- container and shipping details, including port of origin and destination;

- applicable harmonized system (HS or tariff) codes used to ship the implicated product;
- consignee(s) and shipper(s) and contact information.

5. Action taken by exporting or importing country

Information on action taken where available, such as:

- measures taken to identify and prevent the sale and export of the food;
- measures taken to recall food from markets including whether these recalls are voluntary or mandatory;
- measures taken to prevent further problems;
- measures taken to reduce the risk by appropriate physical treatment;
- methods of diagnosis and treatment of affected persons;
- measures taken regarding final disposition (e.g. destruction of the food);
- laboratory analyses.
- any additional information that may be useful to assess the risk of this event

6. Details of the designated primary official contact point and of the relevant competent authority

Full contact details, including the name of the competent authority, address, telephone, email address and facsimile numbers of persons or offices that can supply further information that may be sought by affected or potentially affected countries to assist in the management of the food safety emergency. A website address should be used where available to provide up-to-date information.