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## **FAO/WHO GLOBAL FORUM OF FOOD SAFETY REGULATORS**

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### **SUMMARY**

#### *Communication and Participation in the Canadian Context*

Government, food regulatory agencies and industry stakeholders have a fundamental responsibility to communicate best practices for enhanced food safety as well as potential food safety risks. Clear, concise and timely communication on food safety issues is an essential element of Canada's integrated approach to food safety. The communication objective is to provide individuals and organizations with appropriate information that contributes to improved food safety practices at all levels of the food continuum (i.e.: inputs, production, processing and consumption).

Canada has made significant investments in communications to inform, educate and advise consumers and other stakeholders. In addition to more traditional communication tools, increasing use of the Internet by Canadians is providing a new, practical and economic mechanism for governments to reach consumers and other stakeholders. Working with stakeholders, innovative programs such as the Canadian *Fight BAC!*<sup>TM</sup> Campaign are making important contributions to enhancing food safety and minimizing the occurrence of foodborne illness resulting from improper food handling and preparation by the consumer.

Implementation of an integrated approach to enhance food safety has resulted in important lessons learned with respect to: food safety communication as an ongoing regulatory responsibility; the need to identify clear communication objectives and to consult with stakeholders as part of ensuring the timely availability of appropriate food safety messages to the right audiences.

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## COMMUNICATION AND PARTICIPATION IN THE CANADIAN CONTEXT

### Introduction

There is increasing national and international awareness of the importance of food safety as a result of the identification of emerging foodborne pathogens and new hazards from imported and domestically produced foods. The size and complexity of the systems from production to consumption mean that the goal of enhanced food safety needs to involve all stakeholders in the development and implementation of integrated solutions.

Clear, concise and timely communication on food safety issues is an essential element of the integrated approach to food safety that Canada has adopted. The objective is to provide individuals and organizations with appropriate information that contributes to improved food safety practices at all levels of the food continuum (i.e.: inputs, production, processing and consumption).

### Communication as a Key Element of Food Safety Strategy

Canada has made significant investments in communications to inform, educate and advise consumers and other stakeholders. Traditionally, the full range of media have been used to reach consumers and other stakeholders including pamphlets, presentations, conferences and trade shows. Now, the increasing use of the Internet by Canadians is providing a new, practical and economic mechanism for reaching consumers and other stakeholders when they need information (i.e.: 24 hours a day and 7 days a week) and wherever they are (e.g.: in urban, rural and remote settings across Canada and abroad). At the same time, the Internet and electronic messaging technologies make it easier to reach and to work with the Canadian media when time is of the essence.

For example, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) and Health Canada web sites provide consumers and other stakeholders with access to information such as current regulations, food safety and nutrition policies, standards, inspection manuals, generic HACCP models, food recall notices/advisories, general consumer information and links to other provincial/territorial, national and international web sites. Links to partner web sites include the Canadian Health Network, the Canadian Partnership for Consumer Food Safety, the Canadian Consumer Information Gateway and the Canadian Food Inspection System

### A Practical Example *Fight BAC!*<sup>TM</sup>

The food that we consume reaches the consumer through long chains of industrial production and distribution. While opportunities exist for contamination during production and harvest, processing and packing, distribution and final preparation, it is estimated that many cases of foodborne illness occur as a result of improper food handling and preparation by the consumer.

The Canadian Partnership for Consumer Food Safety Education is a unique, non-profit coalition of industry, consumer, government, health and environmental organizations. Working together since December 1997, the mandate of the Canadian Partnership is to contribute to the reduction of microbial foodborne illness in Canada by increasing awareness of safe food handling practices through the coordination and delivery of food safety education programs focussed on the consumer.

The Canadian *Fight BAC!*<sup>TM</sup> Campaign borrows models from the United States *Fight BAC!*<sup>TM</sup> program and from other sources, validates the science and provides Canadian context with respect to key consumer messages. In addition to specific member initiatives, *Fight BAC!*<sup>TM</sup> has developed a range of consumer tools and programs including action kits, bookmarks, a portable exhibit and mascot for trade shows/conferences, brochures, stickers, fact sheets, refrigerator thermometers, colouring sheets, travel and word find games. The Partnership has developed two learning programs for educators to teach food safety to school-aged children in Kindergarten to Grade 3 and Grades 4 to 7. A food safety program for seniors is being developed.

### Lessons Learned

Government, food regulatory agencies and industry stakeholders have a fundamental responsibility to communicate best practices for enhanced food safety as well as potential food safety risks. Communication on food safety issues is an essential element of the Canadian strategy to enhance food safety. Programs, such as *Fight BAC!*<sup>TM</sup>, are an important part of informing, educating and advising consumers. Our experience suggests:

- ◆ food safety communication is an ongoing responsibility;
- ◆ the purpose, context and objectives of any communication initiative should be identified and clearly understood – otherwise the possibility exists of missed opportunities to deliver timely, effective food safety messages;
- ◆ consultation with and the active participation of stakeholders is an important consideration in the delivery of balanced, credible food safety messages;
- ◆ while food safety issues and the implications of regulatory remedies may be complex, all communication with stakeholders needs to be clear, concise and timely;
- ◆ where uncertainties exist in terms of information or the underlying science, food safety communication needs to acknowledge this as part of providing appropriate guidance to consumers and other stakeholders;
- ◆ be pragmatic borrowing the best ideas from others and adapting these ideas is more efficient and effective than *starting from scratch* and *reinventing the wheel*; and
- ◆ information on food safety issues should be widely available – as appropriate, the use of technology is providing new, practical and economical ways of sharing information with consumers and other stakeholders – effective use of the Internet is an important part of the Canadian food safety communication strategy.

**For additional information, please consult:**

<http://www.inspection.gc.ca/>

provides links to the CFIA Consumer Centre and information on allergy alerts, biotechnology, food facts, program partners and travel.

<http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca>

provides information on Health Canada warnings and advisory notices, food safety policies and standards.

[www.canfightbac.org](http://www.canfightbac.org)

provides an interactive one stop source for information on the Canadian Partnership for Consumer Food Safety Education.