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NEW APPROACHES TO CONSIDER IN CAPACITY BUILDING AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE - BUILDING ALLIANCES

CONFERENCE ROOM DOCUMENT PROPOSED BY THE USA

SUMMARY

This document provides a brief summary of new approaches being implemented by US regulatory agencies in capacity building and technical assistance around the world, with emphasis in the Americas. Aims of the work are:

- protecting public health,
- enhancing regional/national regulatory systems, and
- developing structures and processes.

The three projects described (the Caribbean Food Safety Initiative, the University of Puerto Rico Project and the Food Laboratories Network) all seek to capitalize on the unique strengths of participating organizations. The difficulties of participant and donor coordination, financial and technical needs, and sustainability of action are key lessons that have been learned from these projects.

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INTRODUCTION

This document provides a brief summary of new approaches being implemented by US regulatory agencies in capacity building and technical assistance around the world, with emphasis in the Americas. The globalization of the marketplace has resulted in a major shift in the flow of regulated products both into and out of the United States. A major portion of these goods is traded within the Americas. The document discusses:

- a) the Caribbean Food Safety Initiative,
- b) the partnership with the University of Puerto Rico (UPR) for research and training programs, and
- c) the Inter-American Network of Food Analysis Laboratories.

These programs will assist authorities and industries in promoting the development, distribution and marketing of safe and good quality foods. Links between these initial efforts and other academic institutions, regulatory authorities and industries in the Americas are envisioned.

PROTECTING PUBLIC HEALTH

Protecting the public's health is the primary basis for food safety activities, including those addressing capacity building and technical assistance. Strengthening the overall food regulatory and enforcement infrastructure in countries will help to enhance public health worldwide. This will ensure the viability of the regulatory systems that govern and oversee food products.

ENHANCING REGIONAL/NATIONAL REGULATORY SYSTEMS

There is an increasing interest in safe and good quality foods by the public, both in the United States and in other countries. Regional and national authorities and industries have expressed interest in appropriate, science-based approaches to respond to this interest. FDA and USDA have frequently been requested to assist and have been willing to do so within available resources. Critical goals are to support local food safety activities and to assure an optimal level of protection. FDA and USDA are finding that initiatives to enhance regulatory systems provide an opportunity to optimally use scarce resources and achieve sustainability.

Universities in the Americas offer special opportunities for FDA and USDA to work with national scientists and educators and, in turn, with local authorities and industries. These efforts can focus on research to support local requirements and recommendations. Also, they can provide forums where interested parties - consumers, regulators, and industry - can meet to develop appropriate science-based local approaches. The efforts of national and regional laboratories to assure safe and good quality foods are needed to support strong hemispheric interactions.

DEVELOPING STRUCTURES AND PROCESSES

Harmonizing regulatory requirements to assure safe and good quality foods and promote trade is of increasing interest to all countries in the Americas. In general in the Americas, no structures and processes exist to achieve these objectives in a harmonized manner. Work towards regional structures and processes in the Americas has been strengthened and promoted via the activities of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), which is one of six regional organizations of the World Health Organization, and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

For example, PAHO plans and executes many training activities in the Americas. Recently, PAHO has supported establishment of a hemispheric Commission for Food Safety (COPAIA). Key activities of interest to this emerging organization may include:

- training in Good Manufacturing Practices (GMPs)
- quality of starting materials
- Codex Alimentarius
- national/regional control laboratories, and
- other food safety issues

Training and research links between the COPAIA and academic institutions in the Americas may be especially useful to promote collaborations and leverage resources.

II. NEW INITIATIVES/APPROACHES

A. CARIBBEAN FOOD SAFETY INITIATIVE

Background

The Caribbean Food Safety Initiative (CFSI), was designed by the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Secretariat, the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB). The purpose of the Initiative is to develop a model approach to assist countries in meeting their WTO Sanitary and Phytosanitary obligations. The \$525,000 initiative was funded by the US Agency for International Development. Implementation began in 1998.

The first step was to create a protocol describing institutions (regulatory, laboratory, and private sector) to be visited and the regulatory (food safety, animal and plant health) areas to be evaluated. The intent was to ensure that the recommendations would assist countries to establish internationally recognized systems.

A team of specialists in food safety, animal health, and plant health visited each of the CARICOM countries. The team worked with country counterparts in assessing existing agricultural health and food safety systems. Using the resulting reports and recommendations, team leaders compiled two kinds of documents for each country: logical frameworks and activity profiles. The purpose of these documents was to assist CARICOM decision-makers to better understand the policies and requirements they need to adopt so their countries can meet international food safety, animal health, and plant health standards. These logical frameworks describe investments that are needed at country, regional and subregional levels.

Results

The CARICOM Members are using the frameworks to:

- achieve greater harmony among national and regional food safety policies and infrastructures,
- promote technical cooperation among developing countries, and
- leverage financial support from international donor groups.

Regional priorities include:

- establishing policy and coordination
- harmonizing laws and standards
- upgrading and developing legislation
- establishing a regional body that would perform services and strengthen intergovernmental cooperation,
- regional reference laboratories and specialized testing facilities, and
- representation in regional and international fora.

Training and technical assistance can be provided on a regional basis to ensure that the development, management and implementation of systems are based upon common understanding and using a common terminology. National level requirements include basic testing; disease monitoring, surveillance and reporting; health certification; inspection and regulation; and standard setting.

Lessons learned

We have learned several lessons through CFSI. First, donor coordination is essential because many people are involved in the project and there is a danger of ineffectively using resources and duplicating efforts. Second, bringing developing country SPS systems up to the level needed to meet international standards is daunting both financially and technically. Small nations may be willing to comply but often don't have the budgetary resources to do so. Third, sustained interaction contributes

to progress. Caribbean leaders recognize the importance of intra-regional collaboration as they diversify their economies and meet international standards so they can participate in world trade.

B. PARTNERSHIP WITH THE UNIVERSITY OF PUERTO RICO

Background

FDA and the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS)/USDA receive many requests for assistance from countries in the Americas. In collaboration with the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) and other international organizations they are currently designing programs at the University of Puerto Rico (UPR). These programs would respond to the requests for assistance by providing information, research, training, and technical assistance to public and private institutions. The partnership with UPR provides an opportunity for US regulatory agencies to leverage resources to attain sustainable local programs, to support regulatory systems and promote harmonization of regulatory requirements in the Americas.

UPR provides a unique academic environment to enable FDA and FSIS to respond to requests for assistance. It is located in a US territory and has a Spanish/English curriculum in food sciences. Thus, UPR will serve as a bridge to Latin America. It will provide FDA and FSIS an outreach capability that the agencies would find difficult to match with their own resources. The partners will work with other universities, foreign country officials, international organizations, and industries in the Americas to develop curricula, workshops and seminars.

Programs will include:

- Developing sustainable training programs for Good Manufacturing Practices, Good Laboratory Practices and Food Safety.
- Assisting hemispheric authorities and industries in promoting the development, distribution, and marketing of safe food for humans and animals.
- Designing consumer education activities to more effectively reach and provide service to the US Hispanic/ Latino community.
- Developing strategies and programs to familiarize undergraduate and graduate students with the Agencies.
- Designing programs to network with United States and Latin American universities to share curricula, studies, reports and databases.
- Pursuing research in areas related to regulatory concerns.

Results and Lessons Learned

This is a developing strategy and we are awaiting results. The partners have worked well together to develop this model.

C. FOOD LABORATORIES NETWORK – INTER-AMERICAN NETWORK OF FOOD ANALYSIS LABORATORIES (INFAL)

Background

Dealing with problems of food safety and trade in the Americas has revealed the lack of harmonized procedures and the inefficient exchange of information among the food analysis laboratories of the countries. Therefore, the US has been working with PAHO and FAO to establish the Inter-American Network of Food Analysis Laboratories. The network was established in December 1997 in Washington DC under the framework of individual country Integrated National Food Protection Programs and the Regional Technical Cooperation Program on Food Protection in the Americas, coordinated by PAHO/WHO.

The purposes of the network are to:

- strengthen the surveillance of foodborne diseases
- foster technical and scientific cooperation among participating countries, and - promote establishment and integration of intra-national networks of food protection programs
- promote and facilitate the harmonization of procedures for food safety laboratories in the Americas
- establish a regional system of analytical quality assurance, and
- promote cooperation among the countries involved in the project.

The network is comprised of a General Assembly of 29 nations from North, Central and South America and the Caribbean. Its ultimate goal is to develop confidence among trading partners that food from the other country is safe. Appropriate governmental officials from each of the participating countries have made commitments to implement the project.

Results and Lessons Learned

In setting up the network, we have learned not to underestimate the magnitude of the task of coordinating with representatives of many different countries and donor organizations. Adequate time is needed to bring representatives of different cultures/systems together.

CONCLUSION

This paper illustrates several methods that are being used by US agencies to leverage resources and work more effectively to improve food safety in the Americas. Alliances have been developed with international organizations such as PAHO, and with regional integration bodies like CARICOM. It is clear that building alliances is not an easy task, but the potential benefits in terms of improved public health and food safety, harmonization, and effective participation in international trade are significant.