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THE INTERNATIONAL PORTAL ON FOOD SAFETY, ANIMAL AND PLANT HEALTH: PROGRESS IN 2007/2008 (Submission from FAO)

INTRODUCTION

1. FAO has been leading an interagency initiative – in partnership with the CBD, OIE, WHO and WTO - to develop and maintain an internet-based portal - the **International Portal on Food Safety, Animal and Plant Health (IPFSAPH)** - allowing users to search for current standards, regulations and other official material relevant to the WTO's Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS Agreement) from a single online access point: www.ipfsaph.org. Work on developing and managing this has continued in the period 2007/2008.
2. As previously noted, the portal was designed to be a practical tool for researchers, policy makers, the private sector and others to provide answers on a wide range of SPS-related questions, in order to:
 - build awareness among responsible officials of key international standards, as well as the measures used to implement them;
 - improve awareness of market access requirements being applied by actual or potential trading partners; and
 - support domestic efforts at consumer, environmental and agricultural sector protection.
3. Previous Codex Alimentarius Commission information papers (e.g., CAC28/INF4) provide background information on the objectives and design considerations behind the system.
4. The portal has now been 'live' and in production since May 2004. This paper outlines some key achievements during the first four years of operation, and details plans to promote the system further in improving national capacity to address SPS related issues.

ABOUT THE PORTAL

5. The portal currently (February 2008) contains over 34 000 records (representing an increase of 38% on February 2007) sourced from 45 different official data sources which link to the following types of content:
 - International and national standards, official guidelines and recommended codes of practice;
 - WTO Notifications and Specific Trade Concerns;
 - National legislation and regulations;
 - Risk analyses, including those from JECFA, JMPR, and JEMRA;

- Maximum Residue Limits for pesticides and veterinary drug residues;
- IAEA food irradiation clearances;
- OIE weekly disease reports, NAPPO pest alerts and EFSA Scientific Opinions;
- National contact points for Codex, IPPC, OIE, WTO SPS, WTO TBT and the CBD.

6. Although usage of the portal has dropped slightly in recent months, to an average of around 9 000 daily page views (excluding web crawlers) as of February 2008, this is likely due to a lack of recent promotional activity (to be addressed, see Section B below). However, it has also been noted that there are annual surges in demand during the spring, which, possibly, can be attributed to the timing of key meetings of standard setting bodies (e.g. WTO SPS, Codex and OIE).

STRATEGY FOR SUSTAINABILITY AND DEVELOPMENT

A: EFFICIENT MAINTENANCE AND SYNERGIES

7. Since June 2006 the portal team has been implementing a project funded by the Standards and Trade Development Facility (STDF 79) to modify the portal's system design, and automate some of the processes which feed data to the portal. The key objectives of this project are improving the efficiency of the portal in the longer term and reducing overall maintenance costs and resource inputs. The resulting \$470,000 project aims to significantly reduce running costs, while at the same time improving data integrity and quality. This work is now nearing completion (mid-2008), although collaboration with some external partners has, unfortunately, been slower than initially anticipated.

8. A key task scheduled for completion in March/April 2008 involves finalising the automation of linkages between the portal and the WTO's new SPS Information Management System. The portal team provided assistance to WTO in defining requirements for this system in its early stages. This work takes advantage of recent 'web services' technology and allows for the automated updating of vital SPS related data sets, specifically WTO Notifications and Specific Trade Concerns, through the portal.

9. The IPFSAPH team continues to identify new data sets for inclusion in the portal. In autumn 2007, all current JECFA specifications for food additives, flavouring agents, and residues of some veterinary drugs in animals and foods were incorporated into the portal, and the portal is now automatically linked to the updated and revised JECFA databases.

10. In September 2007 the 7th Session of the Codex *ad hoc* Intergovernmental Task Force on Foods Derived from Biotechnology (Chiba, Japan, 24-28 September, 2007) approved¹, for final consideration by the 31st Codex Alimentarius Commission, a data and information sharing mechanism on r-DNA plants authorized in accordance with the Codex Plant Guideline. The portal is central to this mechanism and, in cooperation with the OECD BioTrack database, the portal team is finalising a publicly accessible central database containing relevant information to food safety assessments relating to foods derived from r-DNA plants. The data entry mechanism for this has already been developed, and interoperability with the OECD system will be finalised by May 2008.

11. In early 2008, work was completed to automate linkage with IAEA's Nucleus Clearance of Irradiated Foods Database via an automated web services utility (providing a HTTP accessed XML output). In the future, links to IAEA's Nucleus Food Irradiation Facilities Database will be created to make that information available through IPFSAPH.

12. The team continues to look for synergies with national projects funded by STDF, where there are opportunities to incorporate further data sets, or include the use of the portal (along with other key SPS-related information resources) in training or capacity building events. In November 2007, the STDF Working Group approved a project in Benin (STDF 127, 'Support for SPS information systems in Benin') which aims to create a national framework for SPS information dissemination, and will build on work completed to date by the portal team. It is expected that this project, to be implemented by FAO, will become operational in April/May 2008.

¹ ALINORM 08/31/34 is available at www.codexalimentarius.net/download/report/693/al31_34e.pdf.

B: PROMOTING AND EXPLOITING THE PORTAL

13. Four years after its initial development, the International Portal on Food Safety, Animal and Plant health is a mature information system, and its underlying architecture is both well defined and stable.
14. With a solid platform in place, the portal team recently turned its attention to a redesign of the portal interface to make it more user-friendly and to give it a more inviting visual identity. Most importantly, the redesign will ensure that the portal's core role as a search engine for SPS related official information is brought to the fore.
15. In conjunction with the user interface redesign a number of related promotional and training materials are being developed:
- A user guide which will be downloadable as a PDF file from the portal;
 - Information display stands for use at international meetings;
 - General information gatefold brochure/leaflet.
16. Additional functionality is also being incorporated into the portal, including clearer XML based interoperability services so external, third-party, databases can set up direct feeds from the portal.
17. This work notwithstanding, promotion of the tool and its wider use by key target groups (policy makers, sector-based trading organizations, academic researchers, etc) in developing countries remains an important task, in addition to any capacity building and training linkages that can be identified with national projects, as noted above.
18. A special seminar on searching Codex-related information online was run as a side-event at CAC 30, which built on a series of pilot workshops held in 2006 in Moscow, Brazzaville and Bangkok in conjunction with the Codex Secretariat.
19. Access to SPS related information via the portal was also covered at three regional workshops on an 'Integrated Approach to Food Safety, Animal Health and Plant Health (Biosecurity) and the Assessment of Biosecurity Capacity Needs' were held in Accra, Bangkok and Santiago during 2007, as well as a related one week international training of trainers' workshop at FAO Rome in January 2008 (with the generous support of the Government of Norway).
20. The primary long term role of the portal continues to be as a provider of core SPS-related information; the intention is that national stakeholders should draw on this core information source while developing locally specific information dissemination tools.
21. Another key role for the portal is to continue to assist national authorities to make their own legislation, regulations or other official information available through the system. By doing so, countries can promote transparency and demonstrate national good governance on food safety, animal health and/or plant health issues. To this end a practical guide to integrating national documentation relevant to the SPS Agreement into IPFSAPH has been prepared, and will be available for download from the portal.
22. The aim of this is to enhance and integrate existing locally-managed data sources, rather than necessitate additional work for documents to be uploaded to the portal.
23. A key benefit of such work with national authorities is that the process of identifying materials for inclusion in the portal can highlight gaps and outstanding issues in the country's regulatory framework, which links to the methodology to assess biosecurity capacity, recently published as a core component of FAO's Biosecurity Toolkit (2008).
24. For further information on ways in which the portal can help improve access to Codex or other data sources, or on capacity building activities associated with SPS-related information management, please contact:

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