

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

### CAC/GL 19-1995

#### 1. PREAMBLE

1. 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 food safety problem to all relevant parties as expeditiously as possible. This must be done in a manner that avoids unwarranted action against other foods from the same or other countries, which are not involved in the emergency situation. The global nature of food trade requires that this communication occur between nations at the appropriate government level.

2. This document provides guidance for use by national governments and regional economic integration organisations for the exchange of information in food safety emergency situations.

#### 2. SCOPE

3. These Principles and Guidelines apply to situations where the competent authorities in either the importing and/or exporting countries become aware of a food safety emergency situation, and communication of the information and risks surrounding the emergency situation must be undertaken.

4. The Principles and Guidelines apply to situations where the food safety hazard (e.g., a microbiological, chemical, radiological or physical agent) has been specifically identified. It 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.

5. The Principles and Guidelines apply to food safety emergencies associated with imported or exported food or food that may potentially be imported or exported. The Principles and Guidelines may also apply to such emergencies where feeding stuffs for food producing animals are implicated.<sup>1</sup>

6. The Principles and Guidelines do not apply to routine food rejections where importing country standards have not been met. These situations are covered in the *Guidelines for the Exchange of Information between Countries on Rejections of Imported Food* (CAC/GL 25-1997).

#### 3. DEFINITION

**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.

#### 4. PRINCIPLES

7. In the event that a food safety emergency is identified, the following principles apply to the exchange of information:

- a) Its nature and extent should, where possible, be clearly and completely described by the relevant competent authorities.
- b) The exchange of information on food safety emergencies should be between official contact points designated by the competent authorities.

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<sup>1</sup> 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"

- c) A country detecting a food safety emergency situation, whether it is an importing or an exporting country, should inform all known affected and potentially affected countries without delay.
- d) All relevant information should be shared by competent authorities detecting a food safety emergency to enable all affected and potentially affected countries to make informed risk management and/or risk communication decisions.
- e) Competent authorities should also provide clear, relevant, factual and timely information to relevant stakeholders to the extent possible.
- f) Information flow should be transparent and continue during all phases of the food emergency situation to enable continuous evaluation and development of the emergency response.

## **5. NATURE OF THE FOOD SAFETY EMERGENCY**

8. The nature of the food safety emergency including its scientific basis as it becomes available should be described in a clear, concise and accurate manner. Even 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 adverse public health effects should be provided by the competent authority in accordance with the principles outlined in paragraph 8.

9. 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 is 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 given geographical area, all affected foods should be identified.

## **6. DESIGNATED OFFICIAL CONTACT POINTS FOR INFORMATION EXCHANGE**

10. 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. A list of the primary official contact points for the exchange of information in food safety emergency situations as mentioned in point 8.b is available and an update is distributed to governments on a periodic basis. It is the responsibility of all countries to ensure that they regularly provide updated information on their country primary official contact points to the World Health Organization (WHO) so that the list of contacts can be kept up-to-date. Although the primary official contact point is the first contact, it is understood that in a given food safety emergency national governments may wish to designate a specific contact point for that emergency.

11. The designated contact points for the competent authorities responsible for coordinating the response to the food safety emergency should be clearly identified. Necessary information includes the name of the competent authority and the contact details including name, address, phone numbers, facsimile numbers, and email addresses of the persons or offices that are responsible for managing the emergency situation and who can provide further details about the hazard, the foods concerned, actions taken and other relevant information. A website address should also be provided if this is used to provide up-to-date information.

## **7. INFORMING ALL KNOWN AFFECTED AND POTENTIALLY AFFECTED COUNTRIES**

12. 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(s) and all countries from which the potentially contaminated food 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 thus identified.

13. Communication should be made by the most expedient means, as early as possible, and with verification of receipt by key parties. Communications by telephone, email, facsimile and if necessary regular mail should all be considered to achieve early communication and to ensure that the message is received by the competent authorities as quickly as possible.

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

15. It is recognized that the nature and the extent of the information disclosure to each competent authority will be as determined to be permissible by the disclosing competent authority according to its national law.

## **8. INFORMATION TO BE EXCHANGED**

16. Competent authorities should exchange with all known affected and potentially affected countries the following information, as relevant upon identification of a food safety emergency.

- a. The nature of the food safety emergency including the hazards and risks identified, the methodology used and any assumptions made;
- b. Detailed identification of the food or foods concerned including product markings, certificate information;
- c. Affected and potentially affected populations group(s);
- d. Shipping and related information, e.g. the name and contact information for the exporter, importer, consignee and shippers;
- e. Action taken to reduce or eliminate the hazard;
- f. Full details of the designated official contact point and the relevant competent authority.

17. The communication regarding the nature and extent of a food safety emergency should include relevant scientific substantiation and assessment of risk as they become available, including how international standards have been taken into account.

18. A standard format for the relevant information to be exchanged is recommended for use by both the importing and exporting countries. A model standard format for information exchange in food safety emergency situations is provided in the Annex. Where alternative formats are used, care should be taken to ensure that all the relevant information is included and is clearly presented.

## **9. ROLE OF COMPETENT AUTHORITY**

19. Upon identification of a food safety emergency, the competent authority identifying the emergency should promptly communicate with and consult the appropriate competent authority/ies of other affected or potentially affected country/ies. The competent authorities 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 in taking risk assessment, risk management and risk communication decisions. Any misinformation should be promptly corrected by competent authorities.

20. It is also essential that all other relevant parties be kept informed, as appropriate, of the nature and status of the food safety emergency. Competent authorities should therefore provide clear, relevant, factual and timely information to their industry, consumers, other stakeholders and the media on the status of the food safety emergency.

## 10. INFORMATION FLOW

21. Communications between exporting and importing countries should be transparent and continue through all phases of the emergency situation, 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 re-assess their risk assessment, risk management and risk communication strategies as the situation changes.

## 11. OTHER CONSIDERATIONS FOR INFORMATION EXCHANGE

### *Level of food distribution*

22. In deciding on the appropriate communication measures to apply, the competent authorities should consider the quantity of food that is involved, the extent of its distribution and the level (e.g. wholesale, retail) at which it has been distributed. In some cases, the affected food may not yet have entered the importing country and communication will focus on the importers. However, in other cases the food will have entered and been distributed within the country or transhipped to other countries. The competent authority should take account of whether the food has been, or is likely to have been, distributed at the wholesale, retail or consumer level, and implement risk management and communication measures accordingly, including a notice of recall at one or more of these levels of food distribution.

### *Re-export of food subject to an emergency situation.*

23. Food that is refused entry into a country, or in some cases food that is recalled after entry, should be dealt with in accordance with *Guidelines for the Exchange of Information between Countries on Rejection of Imported Food* (CAC/GL 25-1997) and taking into account the *Code of Ethics for International Trade in Foods* (CAC/RCP 20-1979, Rev. 1-1985)<sup>2</sup>.

### *Food Safety Emergency Plan*

24. Importing and exporting countries should develop a food safety emergency plan that would indicate the procedures to be followed in the case of a food safety emergency<sup>3</sup>. The plan should contain specific provision relating to the exchange of information including keeping their public informed, as appropriate, of food safety emergency.

### *Role of FAO and WHO*

25. Although the information exchange components of these guidelines are primarily intended for use between the competent authorities of the importing and exporting countries, copies or summaries of relevant information regarding the emergency should be provided to FAO, WHO or other international organizations on request. In these situations, the FAO and WHO may be able to offer technical advice and assistance to one or more of the affected countries or countries yet to be affected.

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<sup>2</sup> A revision of the Code was under development in the Codex Committee on General Principles at the time this text was developed.

<sup>3</sup> e.g. Guidelines for Strengthening National Food Control Systems (FAO/WHO); "Terrorist Threat to Food" (WHO).

**Annex****STANDARD FORMAT FOR INFORMATION EXCHANGE IN FOOD SAFETY EMERGENCY SITUATIONS**

The following constitutes the information that should be exchanged between competent authorities of both exporting and importing countries involved in a food safety emergency. A food safety emergency is 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.

**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:

- 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.

**2. Identification of foods concerned**

The foods 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 emergency situations 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.

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.

### **4. Shipping and Related Information**

Information on the following should be provided:

- Exporter name and contact information;
- Importer name and contact information;
- Container and shipping details, including port of origin and destination;
- Consignee(s) and shipper(s) and contact information.

### **5. Action taken by exporting or importing country**

Information on action taken, 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).

### **6. Details of the designated 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.