

FOOD STANDARDS NEWS



The Newsletter of the Australia New Zealand Food Authority

December 2001



FROM THE
MANAGING
DIRECTOR'S
DESK

Labelling

The report by the Allen Group, which we commissioned to undertake a cost/benefit analysis of the various regulatory options to manage nutrient content claims appearing on food labels, has yet again pointed to the costs to the community of diet related diseases.

The most recent major study by the Institute of Health and Welfare in 1999 on the burden of disease and injury in Australia demonstrated the important role nutrition plays in the health of the community. Using the Disability-Adjusted Life Year approach - equivalent to a lost year of healthy life - to assess the burden of disease, the study found that cardiovascular diseases were the leading cause of overall disease burden, followed by type 2 diabetes and colorectal cancer.

Diseases such as these are largely preventable by dietary changes, but without the necessary information provided on food labels, consumers face considerable difficulty in selecting the products which will avoid damage to their health.

At the launch of ANZFA's information poster on the new labelling standards, Dr Rosemary Stanton talked about how many people, trying to reduce their cholesterol levels, read ingredient lists searching for vegetable based fats and oils in the belief that such products did not contain saturated fats. These people often failed in their attempts to control their cholesterol levels by diet because they did not know that while many are low in saturated fats, some of the vegetable fats had more saturated fat than beef dripping or lard.

The new nutrition information panels, which state the amount of saturated fat and carbohydrates in the food, should reduce the suffering and costs of nutrition related diseases by giving people the capacity to make informed, healthy choices about their food particularly to reduce the risk of diabetes and cardiovascular disease.

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New labelling laws for GM foods

The Australia New Zealand Food Authority (ANZFA) has released a new consumer pamphlet - *Genetically Modified Foods* explaining the new labelling rules for genetically modified (GM) foods which came into effect on Friday 7 December 2001.

From that date, GM food products on sale in Australia and New Zealand - either as a whole food or as an ingredient - must have their GM status identified if modified genetic material or protein is present in the final food. Highly refined sugars and oils will not need to be labelled if there is no modified genetic material in the final food. There are minor exemptions to this requirement, such as some GM additives and processing aids.

The pamphlet is available in Australia from Coles, Woolworths and some independent supermarkets, from the Gene Technology Information Service (GTIS) and from ANZFA offices.

ANZFA's Managing Director Ian Lindenmayer said that over the past year, many manufacturers have indicated an intention to use ingredients made from conventional rather than genetically modified crops. Consumers may therefore not find many products labelled as GM foods on 7 December.

Mr Lindenmayer said GM foods that do not identify the GM ingredients on their labels, which were produced and packaged prior to 7 December, can remain on the shelves until used up, but for no longer than 12 months.

However, because turnover of food products in supermarkets is normally rapid, only a small proportion of unlabelled GM foods should be on the shelves for more than a month or two.

"Under the current food standards, no genetically modified food will be permitted on the market in Australia and New Zealand unless it has passed a stringent scientific risk assessment by ANZFA and been found to be at least as safe as its conventional equivalent food," Mr Lindenmayer said.

The new labelling regulations will be enforced by each State and Territory and by the New Zealand Government.

For general information on gene technology, contact the Gene Technology Information Service on freecall 1800 631 276 or visit the Biotechnology Australia website at www.biotechnology.gov.au or visit the ANZFA website at www.anzfa.gov.au or www.anzfa.govt.nz

New Zealand launch of food labelling poster



Hon Ruth Dyson, Associate Minister for Health (left), Bronwen Hanny, New Zealand Nutrition Foundation (centre) and Amanda Wynne, New Zealand Dietetics Association (right) at the recent launch in New Zealand of the food labelling poster. This launch took place at the New Zealand Nutrition Foundation Seminar – The Carbohydrate Advantage.

Directory of food trade contacts

In October 1997, Australian and New Zealand trade ministers met with their Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) counterparts to identify ways to facilitate trade and investment flows between ASEAN countries, Australia and New Zealand. One of the initiatives agreed to at the ministerial meeting was the creation of a Directory of Food Trade Contacts. Australia agreed to manage and coordinate the development of the Directory.

ANZFA obtained funding from AusAID's Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Support Program to develop the Directory. Our Regional Projects Program, in collaboration with True North Consulting Pty Ltd, have designed and created a Directory comprising a web-based series of interconnected country pages. The Directory will provide a user-friendly, comprehensive guide to the contact details of regulatory agencies and other relevant organisations involved in the domestic and international trade in food. Specifically, it will:

- provide access to information about regulatory requirements in ASEAN and APEC member economies;
- facilitate trade and market access for food within the region;
- encourage greater transparency and information exchange in the food trade sector;
- enhance Australia's commitment to closer links between, and broaden the range of activities with, ASEAN and APEC; and
- provide direct links to the services and functions of other government agencies and relevant organisations.

The Australian country page is up and running, and the development of the New Zealand page is progressing with the assistance of a grant from New Zealand's Official Development Assistance Program.

We have also received funds through the APEC Support Program to conduct training on how to create and maintain country pages for targeted ASEAN and APEC developing economies within the region. The training will ensure that these countries get the maximum benefit from using the Directory.

The Directory can be accessed through www.foodtradecontacts.com. Comments on the Directory are welcome and can be sent to directory@anzfa.gov.au.

For further information on ANZFA's Regional Projects Program, contact Patricia Fox on 02 6271 2660 or email patricia.fox@anzfa.gov.au

« From the MD's Desk cont...

Food Safety Week

Congratulations to the Food Safety Information Council on another very successful Food Safety Week. As usual, the Week generated a lot of media coverage on issues affecting food safety in the home. It has proved to be a very cost-effective way of getting messages to the public on simple steps they can take to avoid food poisoning.

This is a very important role in public health. The new Food Safety Standards, which involve all aspects of food production, transportation and retail, will help ensure that food is safe up until the time it is purchased. Once it leaves the store, however, its continued safety is up to the consumer.

While the food service sector is by far the most serious source of food borne illness, recent research in the United Kingdom shows that dinner parties, barbecues and other social functions are the most common cause of domestic food poisoning (about 88% of all domestic cases).

The new study showed that chicken dishes and food containing raw egg were the biggest source of post-party illness and that Salmonella bacteria were responsible for most cases of food poisoning reported among party guests.

The researchers discovered that many hosts, unused to preparing food for large numbers of people, undercooked meats, failed to keep food refrigerated and allowed it to be cross-contaminated, by using the same knife or surface to chop both uncooked and cooked meats. Poor food storage caused 39% of the reported cases, under-cooking 31% and cross-contamination 20%.

This risk is likely to be even more the case in Australia where much of our entertaining is

done during the hot summer months when the risk of food poisoning is higher than usual.

The need for caution is worth bearing in mind as we come to the peak entertaining season with Christmas and New Year as well as other celebrations such as Chanukah in December and the Chinese New Year in early February.

The contribution of the Food Safety Week in helping consumers reduce the risk to themselves and their families is invaluable and I thank the members of the Council for their efforts.

Happy holidays

At the end of another busy year, I take this opportunity to thank all members of the ANZFA staff and the ANZFA Board for their sustained efforts and high achievements during the year. Thank you also to those stakeholders who contributed ideas, evidence and analysis to support our work this year.

We have concentrated heavily this year on helping industry implement the new food standards and educating consumers on changes such as nutrition, percentage and warning labels.

The next year will be a challenging one for us all. With our metamorphosis from ANZFA to FSANZ, a great deal of work will be needed to minimise any confusion during the changeover period and to ensure that the name Food Standards Australia New Zealand quickly becomes known in the community and gains the trust of the people of Australia and New Zealand.

I wish you all a very happy and safe holiday.

Ian Lindenmayer
Managing Director

BSE and country categorisation

On 5 January 2001, the Australian and New Zealand Governments announced a temporary suspension on imports of beef and beef products from thirty European countries due to the rising incidence across Europe of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), better known as 'mad cow disease'. In addition, beef products from these countries were voluntarily withdrawn from supermarkets. Consumers were advised to discard products containing beef that were already purchased. These emergency measures were intended to provide our consumers with an adequate level of protection while ANZFA and other agencies gathered and assessed scientific evidence and recommendations from relevant international organisations to develop a targeted, robust, permanent measure.

Since that time, the Australia New Zealand Food Standards Council has officially agreed to an amendment to the Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code, which requires all beef and beef products sold in Australia to be derived from cattle that are free from BSE. New Zealand opted to develop its own standard. Linked to this standard is a new certification regime, which applies to all countries intending to export beef to Australia. A certification system is necessary because there is currently no test to identify the BSE agent in processed beef products. In order to implement the certification system, ANZFA will categorise countries according to their BSE risk for Australia.

In September 2001, Dr Joachim Kreysa from the European Commission's Scientific Steering Committee (SSC) visited Canberra and assisted in training a number of ANZFA staff in the SSC's methodology for BSE risk assessment. Dr Kreysa passed on his knowledge and experience from overseeing the categorisation of approximately 40 countries by the European Commission in their Geographical BSE Risk (GBR) Assessment process. In placing countries into categories, ANZFA will utilise a country's standing with other international bodies, such as the SSC and the Office International des Epizooties, and draw on ANZFA's own knowledge of conditions within a country through information received from answers to a detailed questionnaire provided by that country. For all countries in which BSE has been reported, the present import suspension on beef products will continue.

Countries will be assigned to one of the following four categories:

Category A (certification required) – beef and beef products from these countries are regarded as posing a negligible risk to human health.

Category B (certification required) – these countries, while not reporting cases of BSE, may have been exposed to high risk factors, such as the importation of high-risk meat and bone meal.

Category C (certification required) – countries in this category are known to have considerable exposure to BSE risk materials, but have not reported indigenous cases of BSE.

Category D – beef and beef products from countries in this category pose the highest level of risk and will be refused entry to Australia. These countries will have reported cases of indigenous BSE in their herds.

Consignments of beef and beef products from Category D countries cannot be imported. Products from Category B and C countries can be imported only if the national authority can certify that the product is derived from animals not exposed to BSE risk and if specific risk materials (e.g. brain, eyes and spinal cord) have been excluded from the food chain.

As from 16 September 2001, the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service (AQIS) has been handling applications to import consignments of beef and beef products according to the risk category of the exporting country. AQIS require official certificates supplied by the agreed competent national government authority from countries placed in the A, B or C risk categories. The extent of the certification requirements is dependant upon a country's BSE risk category.

ANZFA has established the Australian BSE Country Categorisation Committee (ABCCC) to assess the data supplied by exporting countries and to assign countries to one of the four categories listed above. This committee has expertise in food safety, microbiology, epidemiology and animal health and consulting closely with other international agencies involved in country risk assessments for BSE.

Exporting countries are required to supply information by completion of a detailed questionnaire that seeks information on

livestock populations and BSE controls. Areas that exporting countries need to address include the following:

- Ruminant populations
- Animal trade
- Animal feed
- Meat and bone meal bans
- Specified risk material bans
- Surveillance of BSE
- Rendering and feed processing
- Slaughtering methods
- BSE or scrapie related culling.

The country categorisations are based on the information supplied on completion of the questionnaire and the validity of this data is the responsibility of the Competent National Authority of the country seeking assessment. Where there is insufficient information, the competent national authority is contacted by the ABCCC to provide additional information. If further data cannot be supplied, a conservative approach is taken by the ABCCC in the assessment process. Publicly available resources such as EUROSTAT are used as additional data sources and to verify data supplied by Competent National Authorities.

Up to 16 November 2001, if a country had been assigned a GBR status by the European Commission, it was allowed to trade under these conditions. However, the GBR rating will be considered only as one of the indicators of the final categorisation by the ABCCC. Any differences in the actual categorisations will be due to the very strong focus in the Australian system on the human health and safety considerations in addressing BSE. Countries that had not submitted an application by 16 November, are not permitted to export beef or beef products until they lodge an application and this is assessed and accorded category A, B or C status. ANZFA has completed six assessments for categorisation and another group is close to completion.

ANZFA has almost completed a comprehensive assessment of the risk to public health resulting from exposure to the BSE agent through the consumption of beef and beef products. The risk assessment will be available for public comment on the ANZFA website in January 2002.

Talking about food safety...

By Tania Bradley

Food Safety Week Co-ordinator

For me, Food Safety Week got off to an abrupt start on Monday 19th November. My phone started ringing at 6.30a.m, before I'd even got out of bed to have my morning hit of caffeine. A radio journalist wanted an interview about food safety for the ABC Canberra breakfast show. Yes, journalists really do start the day that early.

The phone rang constantly for the rest of the day and I talked to radio and newspaper journalists from around Australia, in-between phoning just about every television station in the country to let them know our video news release would reach them by satellite at 11.30am.

The media interest kept up very well all week. By mid-week ANZFA's Director of Public Affairs, Lydia Buchtmann, who took on almost all the radio interviews – including the very early morning ones – had just about lost her voice. Many Food Safety Week spokespeople in state health departments also talked themselves hoarse.

When it wasn't the media phoning, it was people from local governments and state governments around Australia who were keen to help, wanted resource material or just wanted to know what was happening in their area.

It was all worth the effort when we saw the amount of radio, television and newspaper coverage we got. Pre-packaged Food Safety Week segments were broadcast on 82 radio stations around the country and 10 television stations. A further 80 radio interviews were also broadcast on the subject. We haven't got around to totting up the column inches in newspaper coverage – but it was huge. I'm



Food Safety Week display at the Canberra Centre. Jorge Guillen and Linda Johnson, Public Health Officers from ACT Department of Health and Community Care were in attendance.

sure lots of Australians now know a lot more about what temperature they should keep their fridges, how to store the food in the fridge and even, perish the thought, that when the fridge is overcrowded, the beer can be taken out and kept cold in an esky rather than the food. 'The beer can't give you food poisoning – the food can', was the message our spokespeople repeated over and over.

We were particularly pleased about the number of messages we got out by radio as we know this is a medium listened to by large numbers of housewives and the elderly. These are among the most important audiences for

food safety in the home messages: housewives because they do most of the food handling (even in these liberated days) and the elderly because their immune systems may not be as good as they once were – making them particularly at risk from food poisoning.

For the fifth year, the Food Safety Information Council, in organising Food Safety Week, has made its valuable contribution to lowering the instances of food poisoning in the home. Look out for the 'Protecting Tiny Tummies' campaign next year which will spread messages about preventing food poisoning among young children.

Recall of jelly cups with konjac (Australia only)

Last month, following consultation with State and Territory health authorities, ANZFA recommended an Australia wide recall of mini-cup jelly lollies containing the food additive konjac, which are commonly sucked out of an individually sealed cup. In New Zealand, the Ministry of Health conducted its own recall.

They are primarily sold through small grocery shops and school canteens.

The recall was because fifteen deaths around the world have been linked to choking episodes caused by this type of jelly cup, including eight in Japan, five in the US and one in New South Wales last year.

Konjac is used to bind ingredients in the lollies. Unfortunately, konjac's ability to bind can also make it stick to the throat, causing a constriction of the airways and choking.

The sticking can be so severe that normal methods of removing such obstructions from choking victims do not work when these jellies become lodged in the throat.

Konjac is not an approved food additive in Australia and is therefore an illegal food. Under these circumstances, we believed it was appropriate that the product be removed from the marketplace.

We have advised the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service to stop food products containing konjac at the border.

Last year, we issued a warning that parents should be careful about giving jelly cups to young children because of a choking episode in Queensland. This warning arose from concern over the size of the lollies, not their konjac content

The jelly lollies containing konjac have been imported from Asia. There are some brands of jelly cups manufactured in Australia on the market which do not contain konjac and these products have not been recalled.

How will ANZFA assess the effects of changing food standards?

The review of the old Australian Food Standards Code and New Zealand Regulations resulted in many regulatory changes, some major, some minor. The ANZFA Board has recognised the importance of looking at the effects the major changes to food standards will have on key stakeholder groups and we have set up a new unit in the Monitoring and Evaluation Program to undertake the work.

Ms Janis Baines and Ms Jane Jessup are bringing a combination of practical knowledge in nutrition, research and evaluation to the Unit.

After extensive consultation, ANZFA has developed a draft evaluation strategy which defines what is meant by 'evaluation' when assessing the impact of new regulatory measures. It also outlines evaluation activities for 2001-2003. This document will be available for public consultation during December 2001 on the ANZFA website.

We have established two consultative groups to assist in developing the evaluation strategy with a key focus on stakeholder involvement: a Data and Evaluation Steering Committee (comprising ANZFA staff and six co-opted experts in evaluation from government and non-government agencies) and an Advisory Group on Evaluation with representatives from

key stakeholder groups in Australia and New Zealand including government departments of health and agriculture, consumers, the food industry, health professionals and enforcement officers.

It is not possible to evaluate the impact of all the changes to the food standards. We have, therefore, carefully prioritised the work and the Board has approved in-principle six evaluation activities. These activities are designed to complement existing data by providing benchmark data during the transition period to the new Food Standards Code (January 2001-December 2002).

The six activities focus on key labelling changes, the new national Food Safety Standards and the change from a prescriptive to a generic food additive standard. The Monitoring and Evaluation Program will continue to monitor the impact of other changes arising from implementation of new regulatory measures by using information from other sources, such as food recalls, the imported food program and total diet surveys in each country, subject to funding for these projects.

Small project teams consisting of ANZFA staff and external members have been established to plan and implement each evaluation activity. In some cases, research has already started to

enable benchmark data to be collected before the new standards are implemented. These activities are outlined briefly below with information on progress to date.

Evaluation activities addressing public health and safety issues

One objective of the new standards was to remove unnecessary prescriptive standards. Activities to assess if this objective has been met include the following:

- A food safety survey,
- A sweetener survey (case study for additives),
- An allergen labelling survey.

Field work has been completed for a study of safe food handling practices in food businesses and we have received the draft final report for comment. This will give us baseline information for comparison with future surveys on compliance with key food safety measures in the new food safety standards. The benchmark survey was undertaken in Australia from February–May 2001 and had two parts:

- A computer assisted telephone survey of 1200 food businesses to assess the level of

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New food composition product: AUSNUT Special Edition

ANZFA has released an AUSNUT Special Edition Database which is freely available to all interested parties via CD Rom or email.

The AUSNUT Special Edition database supports ANZFA's recently released Nutrition Panel Calculator (NPC). The NPC is a web-based, on-line nutrition labelling tool developed to help food manufacturers and retailers work out average nutrient quantities for the purposes of nutrition labelling. The new Food Standards Code requires that most packaged foods now display a nutrition information panel on the label which must include the average quantities of energy (expressed in kilojoules), protein, fat, saturated fat, carbohydrate, sugars and sodium in both 100 g (or 100 ml) of the food and a serving of the food. The NPC can be accessed via our website www.anzfa.gov.au.

AUSNUT Special Edition is based on AUSNUT 1999 which contains Australian nutrient data

and associated information for more than 4500 foods based on the food intake data from the 1995 National Nutrition Survey.

A number of changes have been made to AUSNUT 1999 to produce the Special Edition, to make it appropriate for nutrition labelling. The Special Edition contains nutrient data and associated information for approximately 4000 of the 4500 AUSNUT 1999 foods. Although some foods have been omitted, a small range of new foods and ingredients that are important to food manufacture have been added. Nutrient values for the seven mandatory nutrients only have been provided, values for carbohydrate and energy have been revised and sodium values, which were previously unavailable, have been included.

The AUSNUT Special Edition database is being made available separate to the NPC, primarily as a resource for commercial software developers who are interested in

producing customised nutrition labelling software, and food companies that already have a nutrient database into which they wish to incorporate these additional nutrient data. However, AUSNUT Special Edition may be appropriate for use by any business involved in the production and sale of food.

The AUSNUT Special Edition database is available either by CD Rom or email. For those wishing to receive the data files on CD Rom, it will be provided in a hybrid format to suit both Macintosh(tm) and Windows(tm) based computer systems. For those wishing to receive the data files via email, they will be compressed into a zip format. When extracted from zip and fully expanded they will occupy approximately 2577KB of hard disk storage space.

If you wish to receive the AUSNUT Special Edition database, or have any questions, please email: npc@anzfa.gov.au.

In Brief...

Food Standards – Current Applications

CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS – Matters at Draft Assessment

You are invited to present written submissions to the Authority on these matters, including the potential regulatory impact on consumers, industry and government.

Closing date: 6 February 2002

- Application A424 – Calcium in Juices/Drinks, Soups and Biscuits
- Application A427 – Caffeine in Soft Drinks
- Application A429 – Use of Hydrogen Peroxide as a Microbiological Control Agent

CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS – Matters at Final Assessment

Closing date: 23 January 2002

- Application A416 – Glyphosate (Roundup) Tolerant Corn Line NK603
- Application A440 – MRLs (April 2001 Antibiotics) #
- Application A447 – MRLs (July-Oct 2000 & Jan/Feb2001) #
- Application A450 – MRLs (July/August 2001) #
- Application A451 – MRLs (Sept/Oct 2001) #
- Proposal P241 – Revised MRL Schedule to Correct Anomalies
- Proposal P245 – Minor Amendments Omnibus to Volume 2 #

Closing date: 6 February 2002

- Application A360 – Hemp as a Novel Food
- Application A428 – Marine Micro-Algae as a Novel Food
- Proposal P240 – Advisory Statement on Modified Milks
- Proposal P246 – Labelling Amendments Omnibus #

MATTERS BEFORE COUNCIL

The Authority has completed its inquiry report into the variations to standards prepared at full assessment of the following applications and will make recommendations to the Ministerial Council that the variations be adopted into the Food Standards Code:

- Application A405 – MRLs (Dec 1999)
- Application A431 – MRLs (Nov/Dec 2000)
- Application A439 – MRLs (March/April 2001)
- Application A442 – MRLs (May/June 2001)
- Application A448 – MRLs (Bioresmethrin)

ABANDONMENT OF PROPOSALS

- Proposal P231 – Small Business Exemptions
- Proposal P233 – Expanded Nutrition Information Panel
- Proposal P244 – Folate Health Claim Pilot – List of Approved Products

EU parliamentarian tells of GM changes

Dr Dorette Corbey, a member of the European Parliament since 1999, had discussions with ANZFA staff during her visit to Australia last month. Dr Corbey was educated in international law and has worked as a qualified nurse in several hospitals and institutes in The Netherlands.

She spoke about the establishment of the European Food Authority and food safety matters.

However, it was Dr Corbey's comments on proposals to strengthen the labelling requirements for genetically modified foods that provoked most discussion. The EU intends to require the labelling of food or food ingredient even if the protein or genetic modification is not present in the final food.

This is different to Standard 1.5.2 of the new Food Standards Code, which requires labelling only for foods where the protein or new genetic material is present in the final food. Under the proposed European regulations, for example, oil manufactured from GM canola will have to be labelled as coming from a GM source – despite the problems of enforcement.

Dr Corbey said that enforcement would be achieved through trace back. The onus would be on manufacturers to provide records identifying the GM status of their ingredients. There will be a one percent threshold for the

accidental presence of a GM ingredient in a food claiming non-GM status.

Work is underway in Europe to require the labelling of GM processing aids, which may not appear in the final food. So, cheese made using the genetically modified enzyme, chymosin, would need to be labelled as having GM origins.

At present, the EU is not considering the special labelling of products like milk, meat and eggs from animals fed on GM feed.

Dr Corbey described the proposed European labelling requirements for GM foods as the most stringent in the world.



Dr Dorette Corbey, a member of the European Parliament, pictured with ANZFA's Chief Scientist, Dr Marion Healy.

« How will ANZFA assess the effects of changing food standards? cont...

awareness and knowledge of safe food handling practices by managers.

- An observational survey of food handling practices in 483 food premises (undertaken by Environmental Health Officers or Public Health Unit officers).

Project teams are in the planning phase for the sweetener and allergen labelling surveys.

Evaluation activities addressing provision of labelling information

Other objectives of the Code reviews were to develop standards that were easier to interpret, to deliver information on food labels that was easy to understand and use, and to enable consumers to make informed choices about foods. Activities to assess if these objectives have been met include the following:

- Completion of a focus group study with consumers to assess their knowledge and understanding of labels, combined with an in-store observational survey and interviews looking at actual behaviour of purchasers. A draft report is expected early November for comment.

- Holding interviews and small focus groups with stakeholders such as health professionals, food businesses and enforcement officers early next year to assess their awareness of the new labelling requirements and discovering any difficulties in their implementation.

- The project teams are in the planning phase for monitoring labels to check for compliance and assess actual practice.

We will report progress on the evaluation project in two stages: an implementation report due early 2002 and an outcome report due 2003. We will place the final research reports on each evaluation activity on our website as they become available.

Janis Baines believes that as a result of this work ANZFA will be able to further improve food standards in the future. 'This is a new exciting area of ANZFA's work', Janis said. 'Soon we will have information that will let us know if the recent changes to the Food Standards Code have achieved what we intended and if they are effective and appropriate for our key stakeholders'.

Anzfa's Chief Scientist Dr Marion Healy talks about marine algae as a novel food

ANZFA has released its draft assessment of the second type of food ingredient to be considered under the novel food standard (Standards A19 and 1.5.1), a dried marine micro algae and its extracted oil. The micro algal species *Schizochytrium* and the oil extracted from it are rich in the omega-3 long chain polyunsaturated fatty acid docosahexaenoic acid (DHA).

DHA, together with other omega-3 long chain fatty acids, has been identified as an important dietary nutrient with a specific role in the developing foetus and pre-term infants. Recent reports also indicate that DHA, with other omega-3 fatty acids, may play an important role in cardiovascular health and have beneficial effects on the immune system of the general population.

It is proposed to use the dried marine algae or DHA rich oil in a range of baked goods, breakfast cereals, liquid foods, beverages, table spreads, dressings, dairy products, manufactured meat products, supplementary foods and infant foods and infant formula. These products will significantly extend the current range of foods containing DHA beyond

those in which DHA occurs naturally, such as oily fish species (eg salmon, tuna, sardines and herrings) and game meat.

ANZFA's dietary modelling analysis indicates that, currently, the mean exposure to DHA from fish and game meat is 100mg per day for children and adults, although exposure may be up to 480 mg per day if much higher amounts of these foods are consumed. Breast fed infants receive about 1.5g of DHA per day through the breast milk. If the dried algae and its oil are added to the proposed range of foods, the potential dietary exposure to DHA for the general population may be up to 950 mg per day.

In assessing the safety of DHA rich *Schizochytrium* sp. micro algae and its extracted oil, we noted that these species are widely distributed in marine habitats and although there are no reports of these species being used for human consumption, there are also no reports of toxins in these species. Secondly, the composition of the extracted oil is comparable to other marine extracted oils, and minor components do not raise any particular safety concerns.

The *Schizochytrium* sp. micro algae has been subjected to a range of toxicological studies that demonstrate the micro algae is not genotoxic or teratogenic and has no effect on reproductive parameters. The studies support the safe use of the dried microalgae as a source of DHA. Furthermore, there are numerous published studies examining the safety of DHA and other DHA oils, none which indicate any toxicity associated with DHA at the proposed levels of exposure.

Together this information demonstrates that *Schizochytrium* sp. micro algae and its extracted oil are a safe source of DHA. The dietary exposure assessment indicates that the potential exposure to the additional sources of DHA is well within the safe levels. We have therefore proposed not to restrict the use of the micro algae and its oil as novel foods. We have proposed, however, that both DHA rich sources comply with compositional and microbiological specifications, and that DHA be listed as an ingredient on the food label.

The draft assessment can be found on ANZFA's web site at www.anzfa.gov.au and www.anzfa.govt.nz.

Review of nutrient content and other related claims P234

Nutrient content claims appearing on food labels such as 'low fat', 'source of fibre' or 'reduced salt' are currently being reviewed by ANZFA under Proposal P234.

The majority of nutrient claims in Australia are managed by the Code of Practice on *Nutrient Claims in Food Labels and in Advertisements* (CoPoNC). In New Zealand, similar claims are regulated under the New Zealand *Food Regulations 1984*. The new joint Code also has provisions for some nutrient content claims. This review is important in harmonising these claims to ensure consistency between Australia and New Zealand.

The review is addressing two key issues:

- the most appropriate regulatory measure for managing these claims; and
- the criteria that should apply to each claim.

An Issues Paper (Initial Assessment report) seeking comment on a number of related matters was released in May 2001 to commence the first round of public consultation. This consultation period of eight weeks closed July 2001. A draft assessment is now being prepared.

To assist in this assessment, we have established an external advisory group consisting of representatives from government, industry, consumers and nutrition experts to oversee the review and to provide expert advice when required.

We also commissioned The Allen Consulting Group (ACG) to undertake an independent cost benefit analysis of the various regulatory options to manage these claims. As part of their brief, they conducted interviews with key stakeholders in Australia and New Zealand, to gather additional data and fill any gaps following the first round of public consultation.

The options (canvassed in the Issues Paper) that were considered by ACG included reliance on fair trading, minimal government involvement (self regulation) through to full regulation. The ACG ranked co-regulation as the most feasible option as it allows additional flexibility and encourages greater compliance. In addition, co-regulation has the potential for improved information provision (and consequent decisions impacting on health costs). The ACG also noted there is scope to gain efficiencies in implementing a

management framework for nutrient content claims by considering this in conjunction with health claims which could allow us to share infrastructure and enforcement networks.

We are now exploring the possibility of defining the nutrient content criteria in Standard 1.2.8 of Volume 2 and adopting a co-regulatory management framework. This approach would ensure consistency and regulatory backing, whilst also encouraging industry ownership and boosting consumer confidence.

Written submissions from the first round of public consultation and the ACG Report will be taken into consideration in the development of the Draft Assessment report, which will be released for public comment in February 2002.

You can get further information on the review of nutrient content and other related claims from the Project Manager, Ms Catherine Deeps, Nutrition and Labelling Program on (02) 6271 2686 or email catherine.deeps@anzfa.gov.au

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ANZFA's role is to protect the health and safety of people in Australia and New Zealand through the maintenance of a safe food supply.

ANZFA is a partnership between ten governments: the Federal, State and Territory governments of Australia and the New Zealand Government. It is a statutory authority under Australian Commonwealth law and an independent, expert body.

ANZFA is responsible for developing, varying and reviewing standards for food available in Australia and New Zealand and for a range of other functions including coordinating national food surveillance and recall systems, conducting research, assessing policies about imported food and developing codes of practice with industry.

ANZFA staff include toxicologists, microbiologists, food technologists, nutritionists and a range of professionals who provide legal, communications, policy and administrative advice.

ANZFA contact details

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