

FOOD STANDARDS NEWS



The Newsletter of Food Standards Australia New Zealand

February 2003



FROM THE
MANAGING
DIRECTOR'S
DESK

Two months after its introduction as the sole Code for Australia and New Zealand, the Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code is now an accepted part of life for all food businesses.

Many businesses, of course, were fully compliant well before the transition date. Others belatedly recognised their responsibilities and put in considerable work in the latter stages of 2002. Now that the Code is in place, I am confident that industry and consumers alike will benefit from the new food standards.

A secondary benefit from the media publicity given to the new Code has been an enhanced consumer interest in the nutrition value of their food. This interest, if it is maintained, should translate into healthier diets which, in turn, should help to curb the escalation of obesity and diet-related diseases.

In opening the 2nd FSANZ Fellows Symposium in December, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Health and Aged Care, the Hon Trish Worth, picked up the growing level of overweight and obesity in the community as a major food safety issue. She also identified four other major issues:

- BSE in cattle (mad cow disease);
- chemical carcinogens in foods (eg. chloropropanols, acrylamide);
- the growing propensity of manufacturers to add non-culinary herbs and other complimentary medicines to foods; and
- increasing levels of allergies in our population (particularly in children).

continued on page 2 »

New FSANZ Chief Executive Appointed

Mr Graham Peachey has been appointed as the new Chief Executive Officer of Food Standards Australia New Zealand. He succeeds Mr Ian Lindenmayer who is about to retire after five years as Managing Director of FSANZ and its predecessor, the Australia New Zealand Food Authority (ANZFA).

FSANZ's Chairman, the Hon Rob Knowles, announced the appointment on 4 February, referring to Mr Peachey's strong record of achievement as a senior executive in several regulatory bodies in both the health and agriculture portfolios over the past eleven years.

Mr Peachey's current position is Executive Head of the Trans-Tasman Group of the Therapeutic Goods Administration. In this role he has had responsibility for the planning and negotiation of arrangements with New Zealand government authorities to harmonise the regulatory systems for therapeutic goods for the two countries.

He has also been Director of the Chemicals and Non-Prescription Medicines Branch of the Therapeutic Goods Administration.

In 1993 Mr Peachey was appointed to the then National Food Authority, where he played a major role in the development of the Treaty between Australia and New Zealand to establish a common food standards system and a new bi-national food regulator, the Australia New Zealand Food Authority. He continued as a General Manager with ANZFA until 1998.



Mr Graham Peachey, FSANZ's newly appointed CEO.

"His wide-ranging experience will be invaluable to FSANZ as it tackles a number of major tasks on the food regulatory agenda of the two countries," Mr Knowles said.

"These include developing primary production and processing standards for various Australian primary industry sectors and ensuring that the regulatory requirements for the two countries keep pace with the increasing links between food and medicines through the rapid growth in the nutraceuticals and dietary supplements markets."

Mr Peachey will commence duty in the near future.

Implementation report on the FSANZ Evaluation Strategy 2001-2003

In May 2002, FSANZ published an Evaluation Strategy for 2001-2003 that outlined how various evaluation activities would be used to assess the impact of implementing the new Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code on key stakeholder groups in the future.

The Strategy focuses on key changes, such as the new Australian Food Safety Standards, the food additive standard, and labelling standards for Australia and New Zealand that include new provisions for mandatory nutrition information panels, percentage labelling, date marking and allergen labelling.

To date, most of these activities have collected baseline data prior to the new Code coming into full effect on 20 December 2002 for use in future evaluations.

Progress on the Evaluation Strategy is documented in the newly published Implementation Report for the FSANZ Evaluation Strategy January 2001-October 2002, now available on our website at www.foodstandards.gov.au under Publications.

This report documents the implementation of the standards to be evaluated and related activities, progress

with each evaluation activity and any action taken to date as a result of the preliminary research.

Reports for completed research projects are also published separately on the FSANZ website in an Evaluation Report Series (Report No 1: National Food Handling Benchmark; Report No 2: Food labelling issues - qualitative research with consumers; and Report no 3: Qualitative research with stakeholders on food labelling issues).

For further information contact Janis Baines, Evaluation Coordinator at janis.baines@foodstandards.gov.au.

From the Managing Director cont.

Our FSANZ Fellows touched on these and many other issues at the Symposium, providing valuable insights into cutting edge science and new technologies. We are indeed fortunate to have, through the Fellows program, access to the advice of a number of Australians and New Zealanders of world standing in their field.

I was therefore delighted to learn that one of our new Fellows, Professor Roger Morris, head of Massey University's EpiCentre, has just been made a Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit. This is a great honour for Professor Morris and we extend our congratulations to him.

Looking ahead

The need for Australia to establish a more effective preventative food safety regime will challenge FSANZ and its State and Territory partners in the immediate future. In particular, microbiological safety needs to be strengthened.

Earlier estimates by the then ANZFA of 4.2 million cases of food poisoning a year in Australia, or 11,500 a day, have been shown by a recent Commonwealth-funded survey to be an underestimate.

That survey indicates that the figure is closer to 7 million cases a year.

While most of these cases may manifest themselves only as a troubled stomach or a general feeling of unwellness, others will cause more serious damage. This prevalence of food-borne illness in a country that prides itself on its hygiene standards is unacceptable.

In our roll-out of new Primary Production and Processing Standards, therefore, we will ensure that the best preventive methodologies are applied in the processing of seafood, chicken and other commodities, within policy guidelines issued by the ministerial council.

The Codex Alimentarius Commission is also concerned about the rapidly changing environment of the global food supply and the need to ensure that international standards are developed in a timely and efficient manner to keep up. To meet this and other challenges, the structure and functions of Codex have been reviewed and decisions on its future are expected to be made by the World Health Organization and the Food and Agriculture Organization this year.

FSANZ attempts to harmonise its standards, where possible, with international standards and so the

outcome of the Codex review is of more than passing interest to us.

STOP PRESS – New Managing Director

The appointment has just been announced of Graham Peachey as the new Managing Director. For Graham, this will be something of a homecoming as he spent about five years with the former NFA and ANZFA in the 1990s. As one of my deputies, he did a great deal to help me settle in following my appointment.

Graham brings a wide array of qualities to the job, including astute judgement, a good strategic sense and excellent interpersonal skills.

With Graham's appointment, I will be moving on from FSANZ later this month. I take this opportunity to again thank all those who have provided so much help and guidance to me including people from industry, the consumer movement, the scientific and public health communities and government bodies across Australia and New Zealand – and, most particularly my able and dedicated colleagues on the staff and board of FSANZ.

Ian Lindenmayer
Managing Director

Launch of joint Food Standards Code: 20 December 2002



In New Zealand, Mr Bob Cotton, Australia's High Commissioner (left) and Dr Andrew McKenzie, New Zealand Food Safety Authority's Executive



The Food Standards Code



In Australia, Ms Jane Coombs, from the New Zealand High Commission and Mr Ian Lindenmayer, FSANZ's Managing Director at the morning tea to welcome the Food Standards Code

WHO releases advice to combat bio-terrorism

The World Health Organization (WHO) has published guidance intended to help national governments establish mechanisms which will minimise potential terrorists acts against food supplies. The 45-page document, *Terrorist Threats to Food: Guidance for Establishing and Strengthening Prevention and Response Systems*, is available at www.who.int/fsf.

FSANZ's Manager Food Safety Programs, Dr Luba Tomaska, co-authored the WHO report.

According to WHO, food-borne agents may be responsible for up to 1.5 million deaths

from diarrhoea-related conditions alone, worldwide, each year. In industrialised countries, one person in three may suffer from a food-borne disease annually. Major outbreaks of food-borne disease and related food safety emergencies are all too frequently reported, sometimes affecting hundreds of thousands of people and having enormous impact on trade.

While only a few cases of intentional contamination of food have been proven, the risk of possible terrorist threats to food should

be given serious consideration by public health authorities and the food industry.

The document examines means of establishing basic prevention, surveillance and response capacities. Because both unintentionally and deliberately caused outbreaks of food-borne disease may be managed by many of the same mechanisms, the WHO recommendations concentrate on working with national governments on integrating terrorism prevention and response measures into existing national food safety and disease surveillance programs

Phase-out of ethylene oxide

From 1 October 2003, all herbs, spices and dried vegetables used as seasonings which are sold in Australia will no longer be permitted to contain residues of ethylene oxide. Furthermore, there will be no exemptions for stock-in-trade for foods treated with this chemical.

In accordance with the Treaty between Australia and New Zealand, New Zealand sets its own limits for this chemical in foods and the use of ethylene oxide in New Zealand is unaffected by the phase-out in Australia.

Ethylene oxide has been used to control bacterial pathogens such as *Salmonella*, *Bacillus cereus* and *Clostridium perfringens* in herbs, spices and dried vegetables used as seasonings. These foods are obtained from a wide variety of plants and, because of the conditions under which

the plants are grown and handled, they can become contaminated with pathogenic micro-organisms. The use of ethylene oxide was permitted to protect public health and safety by reducing this potential microbiological contamination.

Toxicological risk assessments have indicated that ethylene oxide residues may pose a risk to humans, although exposure through herbs and spices is very low. To minimise the public health implications of ethylene oxide residues, a strict maximum level of 20 mg/kg was instituted.

In addition, a withholding period of three weeks was imposed to allow a further reduction of any residues following treatment. These measures, which apply until 1 October 2003, have helped to ensure that the residues in treated foods are minimised while a smooth transition to other safer and

more sustainable technologies occurs.

An industry-government Working Group was established to investigate the use of more sustainable safer technologies and to encourage and monitor the reduction in the use of ethylene oxide. This Working Group has made significant progress toward ensuring the phase-out of this chemical well before the deadline.

Alternative techniques have already been adopted for approximately 90% by volume of all herbs and spices. The techniques considered by industry to guarantee a safe product and retain quality are steam sterilisation, through-chain good manufacturing practice and batch selection.

Significant progress has been made in reducing the use of ethylene oxide and its complete phase-out is on schedule for the October deadline.

Limited services during Canberra bushfires

The devastating bushfires in Canberra last month reduced the number of FSANZ staff on duty, but important services were maintained, albeit on a limited basis. At one time, almost half of FSANZ's Canberra-based staff was away on planned leave or on fire emergency leave.

However, it was possible to maintain national coordination for food product recalls, the media service, the consumer information service and, for most of the period, the help desk set up to address industry enquiries about

the new *Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code*.

In common with other Australian government agencies, FSANZ responded to the bushfire crisis by supporting staff who were directly affected by the fire and making counselling services available to others who experienced stress from the event.

Our Evaluation Coordinator, Janis Baines, and her family, lost their house and contents, as did a former staff

member, John Stafford. A number of staff had personal belongings destroyed or suffered damage to their houses.

It was a time of anxiety for most FSANZ staff. We regret any delays to our responses during this period. FSANZ services have now been restored to full capacity, but we are keeping an eye on the thermometer and the wind direction, as there are still many fires burning in the surrounding bushland.

Baltic fish products in Australia

In December, questions were raised in the Australian media about the impact on consumers of eating fish products from the Baltic countries. There have been suggestions that some such products may contain dioxins.

FSANZ is aware of various measures taken by authorities and industry in Europe to reduce the levels of dioxin contamination in the environment and, consequently, in food. While we believe that it is preferable to minimise levels of dioxin consumed, short-term or low-level exposures do not represent a threat to public health. Concerns about consumers' health arise from sustained exposure over the long term.

Levels of exposure to dioxins are believed to be significantly lower in Australia than in most other parts of the world. Nevertheless,

Australia is currently implementing a National Dioxins Program to reduce dioxins in the environment and hence in the food supply.

FSANZ is continuing to monitor emerging data on dioxins in our food supply and is maintaining close contact with other countries' food regulatory authorities on this issue. We are also participating in the Joint Expert Committee on Food Additives, which is the FAO/WHO senior scientific advisory body dealing with food contaminants, including dioxins.

We consider that there is no reason at this stage to avoid regular consumption of fish and fish products. They are a valuable source of key nutrients, including those that are important to heart health.

New FSANZ principal microbiologist

Mr Deon Mahoney has been appointed to the position of Principal Microbiologist in FSANZ's Food Safety Program and took up his appointment last month.

Deon Mahoney has a strong background in food microbiology and food science, with experience in a number of primary industry sectors, including seafood and meat. Deon has been associated with the work of the World Health Organization in the food safety area for over 10 years, contributing to many WHO documents, including the WHO Global Food Safety Strategy.

In his most recent assignment, Deon led a WHO-implemented, Asian Development Bank-supported food safety project in Vietnam. His academic career has included research and lecturing in the field of microbiology and food science, including HACCP based systems.

His duties will include leadership and professional support for FSANZ staff in microbiological risk assessments as well as a responsibility for the development of the Primary Production and Processing Standard for seafood.



Mr Deon Mahoney, FSANZ's principal microbiologist

New safety standard developed for seafood

Currently, retail and food service businesses that process and sell seafood are regulated through Chapters 1, 2 and 3 of the *Food Standards Code*. Compliance with the Code is required under State and Territory legislation and is enforced by State and Territory governments.

Chapters 1 and 2 of the *Food Standards Code* regulate labelling, additives, contaminants, pesticide residues, antibiotics, microbiological limits and heavy metals in seafood. Chapter 3 of the Code contains *Food Safety Standards* which have provisions for the safe and hygienic handling of seafood and the maintenance of premises and equipment where seafood is handled. These *Food Safety Standards* do not apply to the seafood primary production sector, except under special circumstances, for instance, where there is direct sale of seafood to the public or where seafood is processed.

Since 1 July 2002, FSANZ assumed responsibility for standards setting in the primary production sector in Australia so that, for the first time in Australia, there is one

standard setting body for the whole of the food chain.

The new Primary Production and Processing Standard being developed for seafood will form part of a new Chapter 4 of the *Food Standards Code*. The standard will be outcome-based in its requirements and will focus on food safety to a similar extent as the standards currently contained in Chapter 3 of the Code.

The new safety standard for seafood will mean that all sectors of the seafood industry will be regulated in terms of food safety, from 'boat to belly'. As resources permit, this approach will be extended progressively to other sectors.

If you deal with seafood in your business and are unsure of how the new Primary Production and Processing Standard for seafood is likely to affect you, then you should seek further information from the contacts listed in the FSANZ fact sheet "Primary Production and Processing Standard for Seafood" at www.foodstandards.gov.au.

What is FSANZ?

Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) protects the health and safety of the people in Australia and New Zealand by maintaining a safe food supply.

We are a bi-national independent statutory authority that develops food standards for composition, labelling and contaminants, including microbiological limits, that apply to all foods produced or imported for sale in Australia and New Zealand.

In Australia, Food Standards Australia New Zealand develops food standards to cover the whole of the food supply chain – from paddock to plate – for both the food manufacturing industry and primary producers.

Food Standards Australia New Zealand works in partnership with Australia's Commonwealth, State and Territory governments and the New Zealand Government. We also seek to engage industry, consumers and public health professionals in our work.

Contact details

Australia

PO Box 7186
Canberra BC 2610
Australia

New Zealand

PO Box 10559
Wellington 6036
New Zealand

Ph: +61 2 6271 2222

Fax: +61 2 6271 2278

www.foodstandards.gov.au

Email:

info@foodstandards.gov.au

Ph: +64 4 473 9942

Fax: +64 4 473 9855

www.foodstandards.govt.nz

Email:

info@foodstandards.govt.nz

Call The **Food Code Hotline** for information on the new standards on **1300 652 166** in Australia or **0 800 441 571** in New Zealand or email: advice@foodstandards.gov.au

Order form

To be added to our mailing list for Food Standards News please fill in the details below and return by:

Mail

Information Officer
FSANZ
PO Box 7186
Canberra BC 2610
Australia

PO Box 10559
Wellington 6036
New Zealand

Fax

(02) 6271 2278

(04) 473 9855

Name _____

Position _____

Organisation _____

Address _____

Postcode _____

Ph _____

Fax _____

Email _____

No. of copies required _____

Articles from *Food Standards News* may be reproduced with appropriate acknowledgement.

ISSN 1445-7911

Chief Scientist Dr Marion Healy reviews the Fellows Symposium

The second FSANZ Fellows Symposium, held in December 2002, provided an opportunity for the staff and Board of FSANZ to consider the rapidly changing environment in which food regulatory requirements are being developed. They include changing commercial drivers in industry, emerging scientific information on food hazards and approaches to managing food-borne hazards and the impact of consumer views, attitudes and confidence in the food supply.

Drawing heavily on the expertise of the FSANZ Fellows and invited speakers, participants at the symposium examined some of the current and emerging challenges faced by FSANZ in this environment. Its purpose was to examine the food supply as a whole, from production (including primary production) to consumption, and to identify issues that should be explored further by FSANZ, in collaboration with interested stakeholders.

The first of the three sessions focussed on the development of standards for primary production and processing, a function that FSANZ recently acquired under the reformed food regulatory arrangements.

A key message from this session was that FSANZ must not only ensure a sound evidence base for its decisions, but also establish effective partnerships with the key stakeholder groups. FSANZ must strengthen its procedures for managing both the internal and external elements of projects and overcome the communication challenges that arise if the scientific information is incomplete and/or challenges conventional thinking.

In the second session, participants looked at emerging issues in food manufacturing and processing, particularly the relationship between emerging pathogens and novel production technologies and the application of biotechnology to food production.

It is clear that the continuing progress in scientific information will allow new and different food products to be developed that

may be superior in terms of cost, nutrition, safety, taste and/or freshness. However, this scientific information will only be successfully utilised if the community has sufficient confidence in the regulatory system to accept the innovations and if the regulatory system is sufficiently flexible to permit the safe use of the new technologies.

Finally, the third session addressed the connection between diet and health by identifying the information needed to understand the nutritional status and consumption patterns of the community.

It highlighted the discontinuities in the information currently available in Australia and New Zealand and discussed the type and level of evidence required to underpin regulatory decisions that aim to influence the nutritional status of the community. Discussion focused on effective mechanisms to inform and influence food consumption patterns in the community, highlighting the different factors that influence behaviours and attitudes of different groups. This has particular relevance for FSANZ in developing labelling and other advisory material for the community.

Although the symposium addressed different aspects of production to consumption of food, consistent themes emerged in all sessions. The symposium particularly stressed the need to further strengthen communication with all stakeholders about FSANZ's scientifically and legally robust decisions, and to recognise that different communication strategies may be needed for different groups.

A particular challenge is the availability of appropriate and sufficient information on which to base decisions and maintaining effective decision making frameworks that take into account information gaps. The symposium also identified the need for the regulatory regime to be sufficiently flexible to accommodate scientific advances while maintaining community confidence in the food supply.

ORDERING THE FOOD STANDARDS CODE

To obtain a copy of the Code contact Anstat Pty Ltd

Phone +61 3 9278 1144

Fax +61 3 9278 1145

Mail Po Box 447, South Melbourne Victoria

On-line <http://anzfa.anstat.com.au>