

Food Safety Week 2008 to focus on hygiene at home

Food Safety Week will be taking place this summer from 9-13 June, with a range of events being run across the UK by schools, community groups and local councils, to highlight the importance of food safety and hygiene in the home.

As the lead partner in Food Safety Week, the Agency is working with a number of other bodies, including Focus on Food, Netmums, the Food and Drink Federation, the Women's Institute, Lacors and the British Retail Consortium, to ensure the biggest possible impact.

These organisations are supporting the campaign in a variety of ways, for example running web banners and news stories during the week, placing articles in publications that get sent out to members, and distributing materials through a number of their own channels.

This year, the Agency is creating an exciting new theme for Food Safety Week, based on the 4Cs (cooking, cleaning, chilling and cross-contamination).

The theme will be unveiled on the Agency's websites on 9 June.

A number of key messages are going to be used to bring the '4Cs' to life, with a bias towards cross-contamination:

- Cook your burgers and sausages until there is no pink meat and they are piping hot throughout.



Material being made available for Food Safety Week will include information on the dangers of cross-contamination

- You can help protect your family by washing your hands before preparing food.
- Help protect your family by keeping raw meat and poultry in covered containers at the bottom of the fridge.
- Never use the same chopping board for cutting raw and ready-to-eat foods.

To support events being organised locally, a range of publicity materials will be available for organisers, free of charge, and will be delivered in mid-May to provide plenty of time for developing events. If you are not organising an event, why not find out what's being organised in your local area and see how you can contribute?

Although the Food Safety Week theme will remain 'top secret' until the week itself, participating groups can pre-order the following items:

- A5 food hygiene leaflet (FSA/1236/0508)
- leaflet dispenser (FSA/1237/0508)
- 4 A3 posters
 - cross-contamination (FSA/1238/0508)
 - cross-contamination (FSA/1239/0508)
 - cleaning (FSA/1240/0508)
 - cooking (FSA/1241/0508)
- stickers (pack of 50) (FSA/1242/0508)
- balloons (FSA/1243/0508)

FURTHER INFORMATION

Items can be ordered from foodstandards@ecgroup.co.uk or by telephoning: 0845 606 0667. If you are interested in organising your own food hygiene event, register your details at foodsafetyweek@ecgroup.co.uk and include 'Register' in the subject line. Foodlink has previously organised Food Safety Week and has resources available on its website that might give you ideas for organising events and activities. For more information please contact Charlie Greenwood at: charlie.greenwood@foodstandards.gsi.gov.uk or telephone: 020 7276 8834.

Inside this issue

News

Launch of imported food database. Safer food, better business supplement for care homes. Possible feed contamination. Review of food assurance schemes.

Round the nations

Northern Ireland forges ahead with new companies using traffic light nutrition labelling. Welsh and Scottish stakeholders discuss European proposal.



A day in the life: supplement p4

Supplement

The Meat Hygiene Service

Safe meat is a top priority. What the MHS does and is doing better. MHS Chief Executive on the transformation programme. The view from Industry.



Imported food database launch

The Agency recently launched the Guidance and Regulatory Advice on Import Legislation (GRAIL) database to help local authority officers enforce controls on food being commercially imported into the UK from non-EU countries.

The database provides up-to-date imported food legislation and guidance on products of non-animal origin, fish and fishery products from non-EU countries. The Agency has lead policy responsibility for the import of these products.

GRAIL displays summary information about legislation and guidance notes, and links to copies of the actual legislation and full guidance. The database can be used to search for current import conditions for a specified combination of product, country of origin and contaminant.

It includes a comprehensive 'A-Z' list of food law enforcement community contacts, details of new content, a news section and links to useful websites.

GRAIL can be used by anyone with access to the Internet (see further information below).

Since its launch, the majority of registrations on the system have been made by local authority enforcement officers, although 'trade users' currently account for more than a quarter of all registrations.

In 2004, the Agency piloted GRAIL with 30 authorities responsible for the major ports in the UK.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The new GRAIL data query facility system can be accessed at: <https://grail.foodapps.co.uk/grail/general/home.aspx>

Users will first need to register on the new system in order to be able to access all of the areas the system has to offer.

GRAIL provides the user with support in the form of both a 'Help' and an 'Online training' facility. Both of these functions are accessible via the 'General' heading in the menu.

Anyone experiencing difficulties when registering to go on the system, or while using it, should email their query to the GRAIL team at the Food Standards Agency at: grail@foodstandards.gsi.gov.uk

Safer food in care homes

The Agency has this week launched a Safer food, better business (SFBB) supplement to help caterers and staff working in small residential care homes provide safer food for their residents.

It follows successful SFBB packs launched for caterers, retailers, Chinese cuisines and Asian cuisines.

Older people are often more vulnerable to illness, and so extra measures need to be put in place to help reduce the transmission of harmful bacteria from the residential area of the home to the kitchen.

The care homes supplement is designed to be used alongside the main SFBB pack for caterers and covers additional issues specific to care homes that could affect the safety of food, including laundry, medicines, pets, mini-kitchens and food donated or brought in as gifts.

SFBB has been produced to help food businesses comply with food hygiene regulations and provide a simple and practical

way for businesses to keep a record of what they do. The safe methods help food businesses identify problems that can occur and put in place measures to prevent these problems arising.

A daily diary is also used to demonstrate that the methods are being followed and to enable businesses to record anything different that might happen, including when something goes wrong. Maintaining appropriate records are a key part of complying with the food hygiene regulations.



Older people are often more vulnerable to illness

The supplement has been extensively tested in care homes across the country and the initial feedback has been positive.

Watch out for information on how the packs are being implemented in future issues of *FSA News*.

FURTHER INFORMATION

To get a copy of the SFBB pack or the supplement contact the Agency's publication line at foodstandards@ecgroup.co.uk or telephone: 0845 606 0667.

Possible feed contamination incident

The Food Standards Agency has informed stakeholders of possible contamination of animal feed imported into the UK from Sweden.

The potential feed contamination incident involved the presence of material of animal origin in wheat feed intended for ruminants.

The potential contamination was detected following routine sampling undertaken as part of

DEFRA's National Feed Audit, which gave positive results for the presence of muscle fibre, terrestrial animal bone and fish bone in stocks of wheat feed from Sweden in stores at Tilbury Docks.

Because this contamination incident concerns possible breaches of TSE and animal by-products legislation, for which DEFRA is responsible, the investigation is being undertaken by DEFRA's Animal Health

(formerly the State Veterinary Service).

The Food Standards Agency is being kept informed of developments, and will provide further information as and when it becomes available.

FURTHER INFORMATION

More can be found at: www.defra.gov.uk/animalh/int-trde/default.htm

Use of food assurance guidance reviewed

Most of the UK's main food assurance schemes are following FSA guidance aimed at ensuring better information for consumers about food standards, according to a report published by the Agency.

The report looked at all the main UK schemes to see whether they were following the best practice guidance published by the Agency in 2003. The guidance advised greater consumer involvement in setting standards, and clear, honest consumer information about what is being delivered by each

scheme. The Agency's report shows that the schemes reviewed have made significant and welcome progress in adopting this guidance, but more remains to be done.

Food assurance schemes are mostly voluntary arrangements managed by the food industry. Each scheme sets certain standards for food production and aims to give consumers greater confidence about the food they buy.

The schemes cover things that might be important for anyone buying a particular food

product, including food safety, organic production and animal welfare issues. Members of each scheme can use a logo on their products to tell consumers that these meet the scheme's independently assessed production standards.

The Red Tractor and Lion Eggs are among the schemes that may be familiar to UK consumers.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Read the report at food.gov.uk/foodlabelling/researchandreports/foodassureguidereview

'Ready, steady, go' for traffic lights

FSA Northern Ireland has announced its delight at *Ready Steady Cook* star Paul Rankin's decision to adopt the Agency's traffic light labelling approach on his new crushed potato product.

The company behind the range, North Antrim Foods, said it is keen to endorse the Agency's labelling system. Its Managing Director Michael McKillop said: 'In an environment of increasing awareness of health issues related to diet, traffic lights inform our customers at-a-glance of the unique benefits of a healthy yet luxury product range.'

Three other high profile Northern Ireland food companies have also adopted the Agency's recommended approach.

Graham's Bakery has placed traffic lights on its new 'Indulge' range, and its sales and marketing manager Alistair Toal said: 'Even though our labelling will be mostly red and amber, we believe the customer already knows this.'

'We ask our customers to enjoy our products as part of a balanced diet and the traffic

light system is the easiest way for the customer to make an informed choice. Red does not mean do not eat the product, simply eat it as part of a balanced diet... as a treat!'

Traffic lights are also going to appear on salads and desserts produced by Fresh Food Kitchen, and on Galberts Garlic Bread. These new adopters bring to nine the number of Northern Ireland food manufacturers with front-of-pack traffic light labels.

All of the adopters were recently showcased at Northern Ireland's food and drink exhibition, IFEX, as part of FSA Northern Ireland's stand promoting the traffic light scheme.

FSA Northern Ireland Director Morris McAllister said: 'It's hoped our presence at IFEX will have encouraged other food manufacturers and producers to join the growing number of traffic light adopters in Northern Ireland.'



Backing traffic lights: from left, Morris McAllister, Paul Rankin, Michael McKillop, and FSA Northern Ireland Head of Consumer Choice Maria Jennings

Training courses for environmental health officers

FSA Northern Ireland has been hosting a number of courses for environmental health officers (EHOs) and has produced a manual on labelling and composition of food law.

Three training events have already taken place, with a further two – organised jointly with the Northern Ireland Food Labelling Group – being held this month.

At these events, EHOs from across Northern Ireland have been given practical advice on how to make the manual a useful tool during inspections.

A downloadable CD accompanies the manual, making this information available at the 'touch of a button' for officers out on inspections.

Mervyn Briggs, Senior Food Standards Policy Officer for FSA Northern Ireland, said: 'This is a valuable resource for all officers carrying out inspections. A great deal of effort has gone into the content of the manual from each of the five environmental health groups in Northern Ireland. And because of the dynamic nature of legislation coming from Europe the manual will be kept up-to-date accordingly.'

Delegates at the training events have also been informed of other FSA Northern Ireland initiatives designed to assist and support their work in food standards enforcement.

Public Analyst Ron Ennion gave an overview of accompanied visits to food

factories, and Michelle Shirlow, of 'Good Food is in Our Nature', provided an industry perspective by delivering a presentation on a new campaign to promote Northern Irish produce.

At a separate event, EHOs attended a course aimed at supporting them in their enforcement of imported food controls inland from ports. This was delivered by ABC Food Safety Ltd, on behalf of the Food Standards Agency's Imported Food Division.

Offering practical advice to EHOs: from left, Public Analyst Ron Ennion, Sharon Gilmore from FSA Northern Ireland, Trevor Purce from Northern Group Systems, Mervyn Briggs from FSA Northern Ireland and Olive McWilliams from Northern Group Systems

FSA Wales looks at labelling proposal

FSA Wales recently held a stakeholder event to discuss the European Commission's proposal for a regulation on the provision of food information to consumers.

The event, held as part of the Agency's public consultation exercise, was attended by about 20 stakeholders from across Wales, with enforcement officers, large retailers and small businesses all represented.

Following lively discussion on key policy issues, a number of useful suggestions were made.

Delegates noted, for example, that consumer expectation would be different depending on product type, and questioned whether the same requirements for both complex and simple products was, therefore, appropriate. It was emphasised that both the proprietary name of the food and the legal name of the food should remain prominent, regardless of other information required on the front of pack.

The group also called for more clarity on a number of definitions in the proposal, for example, 'front of pack', 'field of vision' and 'principle field of vision'.

Other suggestions were made on nutrition labelling, label clarity, country of origin labelling, foods sold loose/allergy labelling, distance selling alcoholic drinks.

All comments will be reported as part of the Welsh response to the UK-wide consultation.

Scottish stakeholder labelling event

An equally successful stakeholder event on the Commission's proposal was held in Scotland, in Edinburgh, in March. Feedback indicates that one of the key factors that made the day a success was having a good mix of stakeholder representatives. This allowed for an informative and interesting discussion.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Full details of the European Commission's labelling proposal can be found at food.gov.uk/foodlabelling/ull/labellingproposals. A summary of the discussion and points made at the Scottish event can be found at: food.gov.uk/foodlabelling/ull/labellingproposals/ssf. These will be considered with other responses to the Scottish consultation.



Communication guaranteed

Agency Chair Deirdre Hutton visited New Zealand to find out about how issues of food safety and quality are tackled there. New Zealand Minister for Food Safety Lianne Dalziel and New Zealand Food Safety Authority Chief Executive Andrew McKenzie later made a reciprocal fact-finding visit to the UK. Over the following pages they outline their experiences and explain the importance for consumers of exchanges of information

Food production and distribution is a global phenomenon, and with food often produced in one country, processed in another and distributed worldwide, a breakdown in food safety at any point in the chain can have dire consequences for consumers everywhere.

This is one of the reasons why Food Standards Agency Chair Deirdre Hutton found her recent visit to New Zealand extremely useful.

A second is that the FSA in the UK does not have a monopoly on brilliant ideas, 'so it is always useful to see what our sister agencies are doing in other parts of the world'.

A third reason is developing contacts, 'because if there is a problem at any stage it is much easier to lift a phone to someone you've met and know than it is

to try to start establishing a relationship at a point when there are difficulties'.

Learning experience

New Zealand is significant for our consumers because it exports a lot of produce to the UK. 'It is also important because I had heard good reports about the way that food regulation is carried out in New Zealand and I wanted to see which aspects of their approach we might learn from.

'I think that there are some things we do better and there are some things that are done particularly well in New Zealand. One of the things that I found very interesting was the way that meat production is regulated there, in particular some of the IT systems used to back up the regulation of meat.

'Some of these systems provide

a range of information, benchmarks and comparators in the abattoir and slaughterhouse industry that I have not seen in this country and which we could usefully look at.

'I also found it very interesting to look, for example, at the deer industry, and see that they have developed systems for sending deer to abattoirs in a welfare-friendly way, whereas we would maintain that – in this country – it is better to shoot deer on the farm. So there are always interesting differences that cause you to reflect on the way that things are done.

'In terms of food safety, it was also useful to see how IT is used to develop whole chain information, for example again, around the slaughter of deer.'

The drive for food quality in New Zealand is particularly powerful because half of all New Zealand exports are provided by food. That makes the food industry – whether it is meat or dairy produce – hugely significant to the New Zealand economy.

'The impression I got from everybody I spoke to in New Zealand was that "Brand New Zealand" was written on their hearts, the Agency's Chair adds.

'That makes the quality of what is produced extraordinarily important, because if you have to overcome distance, as they do in New Zealand, then you have to offer something else, and what they seek to provide is that

assurance of quality.

'The New Zealand authorities were particularly interested in the way that we handle risk communication. I think that, possibly, for a country that has focused so much on food safety and its export profile, risk communication to the public – to the domestic market – is something that is less developed than here.

'The Food Standards Agency here was, after all, borne from the fact that the public were very unhappy about the way food was regulated, so risk communication has always been an absolutely fundamental part of what we do, and is completely bound into the way we do both risk assessment and risk management.

Benefit to taxpayer

'The bottom line is that no national regulators have such resource that we can "go it alone". So if we can co-operate on the science and scientific research it is very much to the benefit of all our organisations and to the taxpayer.

'If I reflect back to the only other major trip abroad I've made – which was to the United States and Canada – some very useful developments arose from that. In particular, we developed memoranda of understanding and joint work in relation to food security issues. In a less easy to define way there has also been a much greater sharing of ideas on how to handle problems.

'I think the strengthening of links with New Zealand will prove equally beneficial. The New Zealand authorities bent over backwards to help us see whatever we wanted and to answer whatever questions we had. They could not have been better hosts, so that made it a very profitable and enjoyable visit.'



Agency Chair Deirdre Hutton: no national regulator has the resources to 'go it alone'

If we co-operate on the science and scientific research it is very much to the benefit of the taxpayer

New Zealand acts on food safety

A new Food Act is being introduced in New Zealand, which will result in a paradigm shift in how food safety is addressed in that country, New Zealand Food Safety Authority Chief Executive Andrew McKenzie tells *FSA News*

A new Food Act is being introduced in New Zealand, to replace old laws that were prescriptive and relied more on ‘command and control’, says New Zealand Food Safety Authority (NZFSA) Chief Executive Andrew McKenzie.

Under the new legislation, which is being rolled out over a number of years, the expectation is that the person producing the food takes responsibility for it being safe and suitable, he says.

‘But we are trying to make it really easy for small food businesses, providing “off the peg” templates and so on. It’s very similar to what you are trying to do in the UK with Safer food, better business.

‘So when it comes to regulating your corner dairies and restaurants and other small businesses that have a common thread we’ve been able to say: “You can invent your own HACCP plan if you like, and pay consultants thousands of dollars. But we’ve worked with representatives from your sector and this template will likely work for you.”’

Ready to intervene

‘Some consumer groups say that our focus is too much on trying to cut compliance costs for business, but what we are actually trying to do is reduce prices for consumers. It’s not about reducing costs so businesses can make more money – competition will look after that.’

NZFSA is, though, ready to intervene to force industry to act, or act more quickly, when food safety issues arise, he says, offering the example of campylobacter.

‘We have a real problem with campylobacter in New Zealand. It’s much worse than in the UK. But we haven’t just sat back in our ivory towers issuing regulations and setting standards.

‘We’ve been working with industry, saying: “Here’s the production and consumption

continuum, what about biosecurity? What about transport? What are the processing options?” So you finish up with an agreed joint strategy that is designed to help the consumer get food that is safer. As far as I’m concerned, that’s a sound process.’

By and large, there is no great conflict of interest between food producers and NZFSA

Industry, every now and then, ‘might drag the chain or fail to see the significance of what we are saying’, he says. ‘So you’ve actually got to force them to focus, and with campylobacter we’ve done that by setting performance targets.’

By and large, though, there is no great conflict of interest between food producers and NZFSA, he feels.

‘The idea of having a regulator is to make sure that the relationship between the producer – or processor – and the consumer is sound. Regulation’s there to underpin that relationship.’

‘It’s about “Brand New Zealand”,’ he says. ‘It’s just like if McDonald’s had a problem or Sainsbury’s had a problem, and you dent that brand. New Zealand is a brand when it comes to food. People perceive it as clean and green, good quality and all of those sorts of things – which it is.

Protecting consumers

‘We find that when it comes to consumers, our interests are not limited to protecting New Zealand consumers, through the standards we set and the way we implement them, but, because we export 80 percent of the food we produce, also in protecting your consumers [in the UK and Europe].

‘At NZFSA we pride ourselves on the trust and integrity of the assurances we give (to foreign governments), and – with veterinary certification of all products that are going overseas – we reckon that we are second to none when it comes to that.’

This integrity and credibility is an asset that NZFSA guards jealously, he says, adding that Government cannot pressurise the authority to make recommendations it does not agree with.

‘Under most of the legislation NZFSA administers, I am the decision maker, the Minister is not actually asked to make the decisions.’

Value of sharing

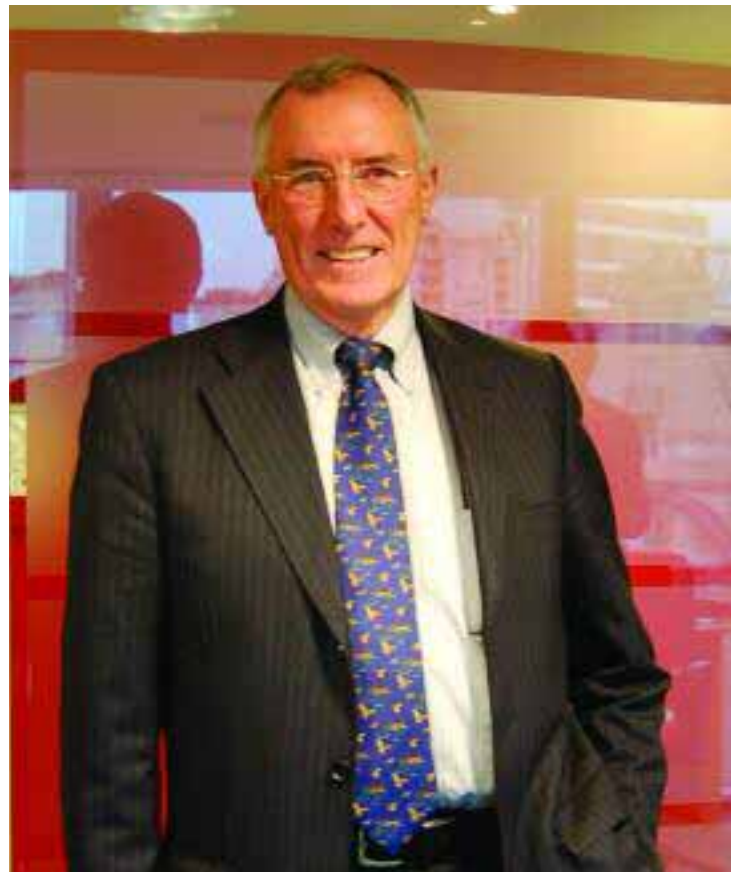
‘The Minister’s role is more about dictating NZFSA’s overall output, and while she might like us to focus on certain things it’s not one where she would override our general approach.

‘If the Minister tried to force us to do something that we thought was not kosher, then I would walk – it’s as simple as that.’

And, like the Minister, the Chief Executive of NZFSA recognises the value of sharing ideas and experience with food safety regulation bodies in other countries.

‘We work closely with food safety authorities around the world – with the FSA in UK, with the Irish, with the authority in New South Wales in Australia, which is a bit like ours, and with the Danes to a degree.

‘We’re actually dealing with the same sorts of problems, although we have slightly different mandates. We all seem to be tackling the problems that we face slightly differently, but there’s absolutely no reason at all for any of us to reinvent the wheel.’



Andrew McKenzie: working with all sectors to improve food safety

Exporting food, importing ideas



New Zealand uses the slogan '100% pure', but is seeking ways to ensure the public get clear and unambiguous messages on food safety

Photo: Tourism New Zealand

In a world where the food industry is now global, the exchange of information on food safety is absolutely critical, says New Zealand Minister for Food Safety Lianne Dalziel

Exchanges of information and experience between people responsible for food safety in different countries are 'absolutely critical' in a world where the food industry is now global, New Zealand Minister for Food Safety Lianne Dalziel told *FSA News* on a recent visit to London.

'In New Zealand, we export about 80% of what we produce in terms of food, and that makes up about 50% of our exports,' she says. 'The food industry is a big employer of New Zealanders, and we have a big interest in meeting international standards – not just for our own domestic consumer protection but also for international consumer protection.'

'People often ask if trade interests overtake the interests of consumers. I don't buy this, because New Zealand's

reputation in its biggest market is everything. If our reputation were affected by, say, BSE, it would be a disaster of immeasurable proportions. And the flow-on affect wouldn't just be to any particular food item that was a problem.

It's not in New Zealand's interest to cover anything up... you could not be anything other than exposed if your consumers were affected

'We describe New Zealand as "clean and green". That's how we are known internationally, and our catch-phrase on tourism promotions is that the country is "100% pure". So to have that in any way affected would be no good. It is just not in New Zealand's interest to cover anything up, because you could not be anything other than exposed if your consumers were affected.'

This determination not to have anything 'covered up' can be seen in the approach by the Government and the New Zealand Food Safety Authority (NZFSA) to a recent controversy over milk.

Risk-management

A few years ago, there was a suggestion that milk from a particular genotype of cow [A1 milk as opposed to A2] might be

associated with certain conditions in humans, such as diabetes and increased heart disease.

A research report on the issue, commissioned by NZFSA, concluded that, based on the evidence available, there was no need for authorities to change their current dietary advice to the general population.

Last year, however, a book was published that raised concerns about the A1/A2 milk issue and implied that the way the NZFSA had released the report meant it had something to hide.

To reassure the public, NZFSA announced that it would do two things. One would be that it would review its own risk-management process – because that was what was really being challenged. The second thing was that the science would be reviewed, to get to the bottom of the claims around the milk.

Minister Dalziel is extremely pleased at both decisions.

'We have been very fortunate in that the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) offered to self-refer the science issue [this genotype of cow is even more common in Europe] so they are in the process of undertaking a review of the literature and the data. We are absolutely over the moon that we have a body of such high international standing to undertake that level of research. Possibly we would never have been able to measure up to what they will be able to do.'

The Minister has just released an independent report into NZFSA's risk management processes, undertaken by the former deputy head of the Swedish food safety authority, Dr Stuart Slorach.

'He found that NZFSA's risk management framework provides a very good structure for systematically and flexibly managing the wide variety of food safety risks encountered in New Zealand and for handling new risks. He also said we punch far above our weight in our work in international standard-setting bodies.

'Dr Slorach also made some very useful recommendations about how NZFSA could continue to develop its risk communications skills to enable it to better inform the public when faced with the difficult job of sending clear and unambiguous messages and at the same time communicating uncertainty. This is clearly a challenge, but it is an important part of NZFSA's role.'

Last year, the relationship between NZFSA and the



New Zealand Minister for Food Safety Lianne Dalziel, left, and FSA Chair Deirdre Hutton: countries must learn from each other

Government was clarified, when the food safety authority was given 'standalone' status.

'It had been part of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry,' the Minister explains. 'A number of us were always concerned about that and it was a great relief that we were able to cut the umbilical cord.'

Consumer engagement

'It is sometimes very difficult in a small country to start up an agency that has such extensive powers and responsibilities from scratch, so setting it up with the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry was, I think, necessary to give it proper impetus. Last July, after five years, it was set up as a standalone body.'

Minister Dalziel emphasises that people involved in food regulation in different countries must continue to learn from each other.

'I think that UK Food Standards Agency Chair Deirdre Hutton may have learned something from our approach to food hygiene, around how we handle meat and meat inspections and so on. And I've learned a lot about consumer engagement.

'The approach [being practiced by the Food Standards Agency] that I've had described to me, of engaging the public from the start and continuing to do so throughout the process, is better for informing decision-making than getting the scientific evidence, making a decision and then communicating that with the public.

'It doesn't mean that you are moving away from the science-based approach, but it means you actually understand what people's fears are, what people's expectations are, and you can then address them. I'm very impressed.'

Last year the relationship between New Zealand FSA and the Government was clarified, when the food safety authority was given 'standalone' status



Photo: Keran Scott



Left: New Zealand's food hygiene guidance works on the basis that people dealing with 'barbies' have some understanding of food safety risks; right: EFSA's independent research into the A1 genotype of cow will be of interest in New Zealand and in Europe, where such herds are even more common

New regulations on food contact plastics

A new set of regulations on food contact plastics came into force on 1 May 2008 in England.

The Plastic Materials and Articles in Contact with Food (England) Regulations 2008 implement European Commission Directive 2007/19, which amends EC Directive 2002/72/EC for the fourth time. These Regulations revoke The Plastic Materials and Articles in Contact with Food (England) (No2) Regulations 2006 and re-enact them with necessary amendments arising from the 2007 Directive. The main provisions being enacted are:

- the current suspension on the use of azocarbonamide as a blowing agent in food contact plastics now becomes an outright ban
- clarification and confirmation that gaskets in metal lids fall under the scope of Directive 2002/72/EC with time made available for manufacturers to

apply for authorisation of specific additives they use and temporary derogation from adherence to the forthcoming positive list of authorised additives that will apply to all other food contact plastics

- a ban on the manufacture and importation into the EU of gaskets that do not meet the restrictions/specifications from 1 July 2008
- clarification of the detailed information required for declarations of compliance
- the introduction of a fat (consumption) reduction factor (FRF) in an amendment to Directive 85/572/EEC, which provides a better estimation of consumer exposure to substances migrating into fatty foods
- new migration limits for certain plasticisers including epoxydised soybean oil (ESBO) and some phthalates
- clarification of the terms

'plastic multi-layer' and 'plastic functional barrier' and provisions governing the use of plastic functional barriers

FURTHER INFORMATION

The Plastic Materials and Articles in Contact with Food (England) Regulation 2008 (SI 2008/916); ISBN 978-0-11-081323-3 is available from the Stationery Office, priced £6.50. FSA guidance and more detailed information on the new regulations can be found at: food.gov.uk/consultations/consulteng/2008/plasticseng2008 food.gov.uk/multimedia/pdfs/plasticregguideeng2008.pdf For more details, contact Nasreen Shah, tel: 020 7276 8553; email: nasreen.a.shah@foodstandards.gsi.gov.uk



Novel food approvals process

The European Commission is proposing to update the approvals process for novel foods, and clarify the definition of novel foods, including the latest developments in the area such as cloning and nanotechnology. The Agency has issued a consultation on the proposals.

The key proposals are to:

- speed up the process by centralising the authorisation procedure for novel foods
- develop a simplified safety assessment system for traditional food from third (non-European Union) countries
- clarify the definition of novel food to take account of new technology, such as cloning and nanotechnology
- update the scope of the novel food regulation in relation to parallel legislation on specific categories of foods, such as sources of vitamins and minerals
- provide a degree of data protection for those who develop innovative foods

Responses to the consultation are required by 20 June, although early responses would be welcome as discussions are ongoing in Brussels.

FURTHER INFORMATION

More details on the proposals are available in the consultation documents at: food.gov.uk/consultations/consulteng/2008/novelec08eng

Food Standards Agency News is published by the Food Standards Agency, Aviation House, 125 Kingsway, London WC2B 6NH
Editor: Frank Chalmers
Tel: 020 7276 8805
Email: frank.chalmers@foodstandards.gsi.gov.uk
To join or update the mailing list call: 020 7276 8829

Printed in the UK, on paper comprising 75% recycled content. FSA/1259/0508

Views sought on Food Safety Act guidance

The Agency is consulting on a revised set of guidance notes for businesses on the Food Safety Act 1990.

The Food Safety Act 1990 is an important piece of legislation for food businesses and their customers. It sets out the legal obligations, in terms of food safety, for all businesses involved in the production, processing, storage, distribution and sale of food. The Act is vital in ensuring that the public has confidence in

the safety of the food it buys.

Following various amendments to the Act over the past few years and other relevant legislation coming into force on food safety, the Agency has decided to revise the guidance notes that it produces for food businesses on the Act, to ensure they are as up-to-date and as helpful as possible.

The Agency is asking for any comments on the revised guidance notes by 11 July 2008

with a view to publishing the final version later this year.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The consultation documents for England are at: food.gov.uk/consultations/consulteng/2008/fsa90eng08 The consultation documents for Scotland are at: food.gov.uk/consultations/consultscot/2008/fsa90scot

New rules on specified risk material

The Agency has welcomed new legislation that raises the age at which bovine vertebral column (VC) is classified as specified risk material (SRM) from 24 to 30 months. The legislation came into force on 26 April.

SRM is the term used to define the parts of an animal that are most likely to contain BSE if the animal is infected.

David Statham, FSA Director of Consumer Protection and Enforcement Group, said: 'The FSA has worked hard to return

the limit to 30 months – this is good news for the UK meat industry. The age at which VC becomes SRM was lowered in the UK when SRM controls were harmonised across the EU. This was a requirement for the UK to resume exporting beef to the EU.'

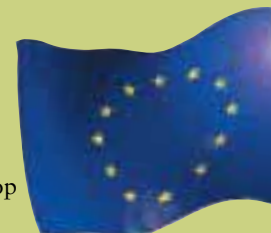
This change restores the VC SRM controls in the UK to the pre-May 2006 position when harmonisation took place.

This means that butchers will be able to sell beef on the bone that is up to 30 months old

without the restrictions imposed by the previous VC SRM controls. This applies to carcasses of cattle slaughtered on or after 26 April. Vertebral column in 24–30 month bovines slaughtered before this date should still be treated as SRM.

FURTHER INFORMATION

More on the OTM rule can be found at: food.gov.uk/foodindustry/meat/otmreview



Safe meat is a top priority for the FSA

The Food Standards Agency was set up in the wake of the BSE crisis, at a time when public confidence over food issues, and in particular meat, was at an all-time low.

A crucial part of getting the UK meat industry back on its feet and able to do business around the world again, was ensuring the UK Government had robust and transparent mechanisms for achieving meat safety and providing information to the public.

Meat safety is in part delivered by inspections carried out by the Meat Hygiene Service (MHS), an executive agency of the Food Standards Agency.

Every day, up and down the country, dedicated MHS staff are working in abattoirs and cutting plants, alongside company staff, to ensure that the food

businesses work to EU regulations.

I'm really proud of the job the MHS does and of the highly skilled and responsible staff ensuring public safety in the businesses they regulate.

While we want to maintain safe meat in the UK, we also need to make sure that the cost of regulation and enforcement to businesses is not greater than it needs to be.

The safety of meat is ultimately the responsibility of food businesses themselves and we believe that the industry should start to pay more of the costs associated with maintaining that safety, alongside the MHS reducing the costs of providing its statutory services.

Over the past seven years, because of the current charging system, industry has received about £190million of subsidy from the taxpayer. We don't believe it's the job of Government to support private business in the long-term so it is now time for this period of public support to progressively reduce.

For this reason we are looking to recover more of the costs of MHS inspections through a new system of charging. We're doing this over time in order to give businesses time to adjust.

But we're also doing our bit. As MHS Chief Executive Steve McGrath will outline later in this supplement, we're transforming the Meat Hygiene Service to make it the leanest and most efficient

organisation it can be. We're reducing costs and staff numbers as well as re-organising the way we operate on the ground.

We're transforming the Meat Hygiene Service to make it the leanest and most efficient organisation it can be

The Food Standards Agency has set challenging financial targets for the MHS, and its progress was set to be examined by the FSA Board as this *FSA News* supplement went to press.

We've also set up an independent advisory body to bring together stakeholders, including industry and consumer groups, to ensure that as many views as possible are taken on board.

We are also working at a European level to try to get a more risk-based approach to the whole area of meat hygiene regulation.

As you can see, we're really serious about getting this right: working in partnership with industry to achieve safe meat in the UK at the best value for the taxpayer.

Ian Reynolds
FSA Deputy Chair
Chair of the MHS Board



More inside

- p2. What the MHS does and how it's doing it better
- p4. So, what does a senior MHS inspector do?
- p6. Keeping control of BSE

- p7. Independent advice on Official Controls
- p8. View from Industry on 'transformation'
- p8. Auditing the MHS



Vision for the future

- p5. MHS Chief Executive Steve McGrath outlines how the service can protect consumers in a more efficient way

What the MHS does, and how it's doing it better

When the FSA was established in April 2000, it inherited from the then Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Foods an executive agency called the Meat Hygiene Service. The MHS comprises vets and meat inspectors who spend their working lives in one or more of the 1,500 or so approved fresh meat establishments in Great Britain. They audit the performance of abattoir operators, verify that fresh meat has been produced in accordance with the regulations, and inspect the final product before health-marking it, as evidence that it is fit for human consumption.

On top of this daily routine, the MHS has spent the past 14 months transforming itself into a more cost-effective and efficient organisation that is more responsive to the needs of abattoir operators, while at the same time maintaining – on behalf of the consumer – its paramount role in protecting public health and animal welfare at slaughter.

Here, Richard 'Badger' Billinge, a former FSA Senior Press Officer who retires at the end of May after nearly seven years as MHS Communications Manager, describes the work of the MHS and the first fruits of the transformation process.

In April 1995, the majority of meat inspection staff transferred to the newly-established MHS from one of the 300 or so local authorities in England, Wales and Scotland. As a national organisation, the MHS was charged with providing greater uniformity and consistency of standards and charges. Consistency of standards was deemed to be particularly important during the period of legislative change as a result of

bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), which was first recognised in Great Britain in November 1986 and became a notifiable disease in 1988.

The EU Food Hygiene Regulations that were introduced on 1 January 2006 place the onus for producing safe meat on the shoulders of food business operators (FBO). Apart from this important clarification, the roles of the MHS official veterinarian (OV) and meat hygiene inspector have scarcely changed over the years.

After the FBO has accepted animals for slaughter, they are inspected by an OV for any signs of animal disease and poor welfare. The MHS works closely with local authorities and the former State Veterinary Service (SVS) – now known as Animal Health (AH) – on any welfare problems that might arise on-farm or in transit.

MHS staff verify that FBOs have accepted only correctly-identified animals, and that traceability is maintained throughout the process of producing fresh meat. The work of the MHS includes examining cattle passports to ascertain the age of each animal.

Unfit meat rejected

Meat is inspected by MHS staff, and unfit meat is rejected. Red offal (heart, lungs, spleen) and green offal (stomach and intestines) are also inspected. Meat from cattle, sheep, goats and pigs that passes inspection is stamped with a health mark.

White meat and meat processed in cutting premises bears an identification mark, which is a responsibility of the FBO (although the MHS is responsible for verifying that FBOs use the identification marks in accordance with the regulations). Samples are taken and

tested for residues of veterinary medicines, environmental contaminants, and diseases such as transmissible spongiform encephalopathies (TSEs) and trichinella.

Each FBO is routinely audited by the OV against the HACCP plan for the premises. HACCP – which stands for Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point – is a universally-accepted food hygiene management system.

Through inspection, verification, audit, and the enforcement of legislative requirements, the MHS is responsible for ensuring that FBOs fulfil their responsibilities for the production of safe food and the protection of animal health and welfare in approved meat establishments in Great Britain.

If an FBO fails to produce safe meat, MHS staff can take enforcement action ranging from informal advice, through to the serving of formal notices and prosecution and, ultimately, a recommendation that the license or approval of an establishment to operate be revoked.

The MHS enforcement policy outlines the major functions of the MHS, the principles of enforcement that the MHS has agreed to adopt, and the standards that will be applied when carrying out enforcement work. It also seeks to ensure that any formal action in which the MHS engages is reasonable, consistent, and proportionate to the risk posed to public health and animal welfare.

The MHS has a wide variety of stakeholders with individual or collective interests in what we do and how well we do it. These include Ministers; the FSA Board and Executive; DEFRA and other Government departments; meat and farming industry representative organisations; FBOs; local authorities; consumers; and those with an interest in animal welfare at slaughter, and the protection of public health and animal welfare.

The MHS is the only Government agency that is present in approved fresh meat premises, and has access to animals and birds at the point of slaughter. It is, therefore, uniquely placed to facilitate testing and surveillance on behalf of others and conducts this work under formal service level agreements. The MHS also works closely with trading standards officers of local authorities in investigating the validity of cattle passports, and breaches of animal welfare during transit.

The MHS monitors on a daily basis the welfare of animals submitted for slaughter to verify that FBOs have the necessary safeguards in place. Operational staff work closely with DEFRA and local authorities in notifying suspicions of reportable diseases. The MHS also submits to DEFRA monthly



MHS staff verify that only correctly-identified animals are accepted



The MHS is the only Government agency that is present in approved fresh meat premises, and has access to animals and birds at the point of slaughter

reports of data collected at every slaughterhouse, allowing trends in animal welfare to be assessed.

Throughout the period of transformation, the MHS has supported DEFRA in containing and managing the impact of four particular animal diseases – avian influenza, bluetongue, bovine tuberculosis, and foot and mouth disease.

Need for transformation

So much, then, for what we do, how we do it, and those with an interest in us. The need for the MHS to transform became apparent in November 2006, after some sections of the meat industry had complained to the FSA that the MHS provided a service that was inefficient, inflexible, expensive, and bureaucratic.

In addition, the FSA had a long-standing concern that the meat industry had enjoyed a high level of financial support from the taxpayer (via the FSA) for the past seven years (£190 million up to 1 January 2008).

It therefore became clear that a completely different approach was going to be needed to satisfy the concerns of the industry and of the FSA, and that would involve improved working with clients and suppliers.

For the FSA, this means a reduced net cost of MHS operations. For MHS staff, it means being positive about the future and embracing new opportunities for further efficiency gains. For FBOs, it means accepting the progressive move of responsibility for financial and regulatory delivery – but with significantly lower MHS costs. And for public health protection, it means that safe meat will continue to be

produced for the consumer. In financial terms, all that has happened is that less money is being spent far more efficiently, so disproving the mistaken belief that the more meat inspectors you employ, the greater the protection to the public.

At the time of writing, we are on target not only to meet – but also to exceed – the tough financial targets set for us by the FSA Board for 2007/08. Gross expenditure is £1 million down, the net cost of operations is £1.6 million down, and our basic financial efficiency indicator – the MHS cost per livestock unit – is down by 25p to £13.34. That is how much it costs us to process one livestock unit, currently defined as one bovine animal, or one horse, or two calves, or seven pigs, or 10 sheep/goats each weighing more than 18 kilos, or 20 sheep/goats each weighing 18 kilos or less.

Our future target is a reduction in costs from £91 million in 2006/07 to £74 million in 2011/12 in real terms. This is a 19% cut in costs, and a saving of £17 million. We have identified further possible savings of £7 million by cutting certain front-line tasks that we are not required by law to perform. These include the use of plant inspection assistants (PIAs) employed by FBOs in poultry premises to help the OV, in place of MHS Poultry Meat Inspectors. A new charging mechanism to be introduced in 2009/10 will offer FBOs an even bigger incentive to work closely with the MHS to reduce costs.

Approved premises vary in size, the species of animals slaughtered, and daily or weekly throughput. By law, MHS staff must provide inspection services for these premises 24

hours a day, 365 days a year as required, given the requisite period of notice by the FBO.

Local service, national standards

The MHS offers a service that is delivered locally, but to nationally-agreed standards and consistency. Nationally, MHS headquarters in York provides all the IT and financial support and other back-up that is required by operational staff.

Regionally, the MHS is recruiting two business directors – one covering Scotland and the North and East of England, and another covering Wales and the South and West of England.

Twelve business managers cover the whole of Britain, and in each of their areas there are three (occasionally four) business clusters. A cluster is best defined as a group of approved premises that are in close proximity and easily accessible for MHS staff in that area. Each cluster is led by a lead veterinarian, an experienced official veterinarian who can be called upon to advise and assist any of the OV's in his/her area and is responsible for the provision of a technically effective and efficient service throughout the cluster.

But however the service is organised, one firm fact remains – unless EU law alters dramatically, there will always be work for veterinarians and meat inspectors in British slaughterhouses and cutting premises, and those of us in the MHS who are office-based have a high regard for our operational colleagues, some of whom work long hours in harsh conditions to help to ensure that our meat is safe to eat.

So, what does a senior MHS inspector do?



Paul Dunn (left), a senior meat hygiene inspector (SMHI) based in Wales, Herefordshire and Gloucestershire, talks to FSA News about his role. Paul and his team ensure animal welfare and hygiene standards

are observed in the three multi-species meat plants they have responsibility for. He manages 13 meat hygiene inspectors (MHIs) and three meat technicians (MTs), comprising full-time staff, contractors and temporary staff.

The plants he works in are small to medium in size. Each week the combined total throughput is about 2,000 sheep, 400-500 cattle and 1,600 pigs. This is busy and skilled work, where checks have to be quick but thorough. One abattoir involves checking 400 pigs a day, four days a week. That's one carcass every minute.

Paul says: 'The majority of my time is spent making sure my team provide an efficient and reliable service to the food business operator (FBO). The FBOs we work with supply meat to farmers and local meat suppliers, such as butchers.'

'My role involves ensuring the right numbers of people are deployed at the right time in the right place. On one day this may take ten minutes but on the next it could take the whole day. Recently, an inspector was unavailable because his car had broken down. I filled-in by working on the production line to check the carcasses, requiring careful management of the rest of the team for the rest of the day to ensure we didn't hamper production.'

Hygiene standards

To make sure hygiene standards are observed, Paul and his team check slaughter is conducted in accordance with legislative requirements and meat is produced hygienically. Every carcass is carefully inspected then either accepted or rejected. Offal is checked too. Animal by-products not intended fit for human consumption, or parts rejected as unfit are disposed off according to the appropriate legislation.

Other hygiene checks include temperature controls, working practices and general upkeep (cleaning and maintenance) of the premises.

Paul and his MHIs help minimise animal suffering in each slaughterhouse: 'We check the positioning of stunning equipment, the effectiveness of the stun, and the efficiency of bleeding. The OV has overall responsibility for ensuring animal welfare standards are observed. They monitor

directly and complete a monthly animal welfare report.'

If there is a problem in a plant, Paul's team gives the FBO and company staff informal advice about working practices. They have the option to use informal enforcement action or stricter measures such as serving a notice or making a recommendation for prosecution or revocation of approval. He says it is important to work in partnership and collectively achieve hygiene standards.

So, how do the MHS and company employees all work together when the majority of OVs are contracted, inspectors are largely employed by MHS and plant operatives are employed by the FBO?

Paul says: 'It's vital we all work together, regardless of who our employer is. Naturally there are sometimes differences in opinion, such as when the OV and FBO disagree on the charges payable by the FBO. My role is pivotal in this. I can mediate.'

'I also mediate between the OV and my team of inspectors and technicians. If the team has an issue that they see as important, I can help facilitate a risk-assessment by the OV. The OV is the spearhead for enforcement, so it's essential we get it right – together.'

The evidence suggests they do get it right. When audited by the MHS's internal auditors and externally by the FSA audit

team, his team consistently come out with positive audit reports. Paul is proud of this and it motivates him.

Paul's role also includes line management responsibility for his team. He monitors staff sickness, health and safety, and authorises timesheets. All work has to be done within budget – at the sharp end – and budgetary control includes him authorising expenses.

What could be improved?

His work is not all plant-based. He visits MHS HQ in York once a month to help develop HR policy and the MHS transformation work streams by sharing his frontline expertise. He generally doesn't liaise with colleagues in the FSA, except when additional charges incurred by an FBO are appealed. Here the FSA acts as an independent adjudicator.

If he could improve one thing at work it would be to reduce silo working, Paul says. 'Operations and HR staff need to be more joined up and cut across issues. It is crucial that operations staff feed their opinions, where applicable, into work streams so we get the best fit. We need to streamline processes and be more outcome-driven.'

■ Paul Dunn began his career as a trainee local authority meat inspector. He qualified in 1990 and joined the MHS in 1995.

Every carcass is carefully inspected then either accepted or rejected



Consumer protection and financial efficiency can go hand in hand

As Chief Executive of the Meat Hygiene Service I recognise the need to deliver the most efficient service to industry possible while maintaining consumer protection through delivering the EU controls on meat hygiene, writes Steve McGrath.

At present, the Official Controls are a one-size-fits-all system, requiring 100% compliance with legislation, 100% of the time. The controls are delivered on demand, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year at over 400 abattoirs and game handling premises across Great Britain. Audits are also undertaken at over 1,000 cutting plants and cold stores. Safe meat is produced and animal welfare is protected – the official controls are working, but at a high financial cost.

Proportionate controls

However, our vision for the future is to protect the consumer through controls that are proportionate and based on the actual risks posed. Eventually, we want to work with the industry to progressively move responsibility to the food business operators (FBOs) themselves.

Over time we will also be looking to industry to pay a greater proportion of the cost of our inspections and we will therefore be gradually increasing the charges that industry pay. However, we are also doing our bit to reduce those costs.

This will involve changes for all of us: for the FSA it will mean a reduced net cost of operations; for MHS staff it will mean embracing positive new opportunities for further efficiency gains; for food business operators it will mean gradually accepting financial and regulatory responsibilities (but with reduced MHS costs); but for consumers it means that safe meat will continue to be produced and public health will continue to be protected.

How we're transforming

Following last summer's FSA Board decision to review the delivery of Official Controls, we've been undergoing a challenging programme of transformation in order to make sure that we're achieving the maximum efficiencies within the existing regulatory system.

We're changing the way we work:

- we have a new operations management team that will revitalise our ability to deliver more and perform more effectively and efficiently
- we are changing the way we do business, becoming e-enabled with less bureaucracy, no more regional offices, better data and more exchange of information
- we have strengthened our veterinary management

- we are engaging with our stakeholders in an open, honest and direct manner.

We are also working hard to reduce our costs whilst maintaining consumer protection:

- we are working to drive down our cost base from £91 million in 2006/07 to £74 million in real terms in 2011/12. This is a 19% cut in costs, saving £17 million
- we've already eliminated 134 frontline posts, saving £4 million a year
- 75 management posts are to go, saving a further £4 million by 2010/11
- we're closing all five of our regional offices

I'm proud of the way my staff are responding to the challenges. I'm pleased with the way many in industry have engaged with us

- there is now closer working between FSA and MHS corporate services to reduce costs
- we're working with the FSA to eliminate specific tasks undertaken by the MHS relating to specified risk material and also to encourage the industry to adopt plant inspection assistants in poultry plants, which together could save up to £7 million
- a new charging mechanism to be introduced in 2009/10 will incentivise FBOs to work closely with us to reduce costs even further
- we're also going to deliver our business through a new 'cluster' model in order to maximise efficiency in the way MHS staff are deployed and how contracted services are provided

Involving stakeholders

Throughout all of this, we're aware of the vital importance of involving our stakeholders. We're holding frequent meetings with the key representatives from industry, consumer groups and the devolved

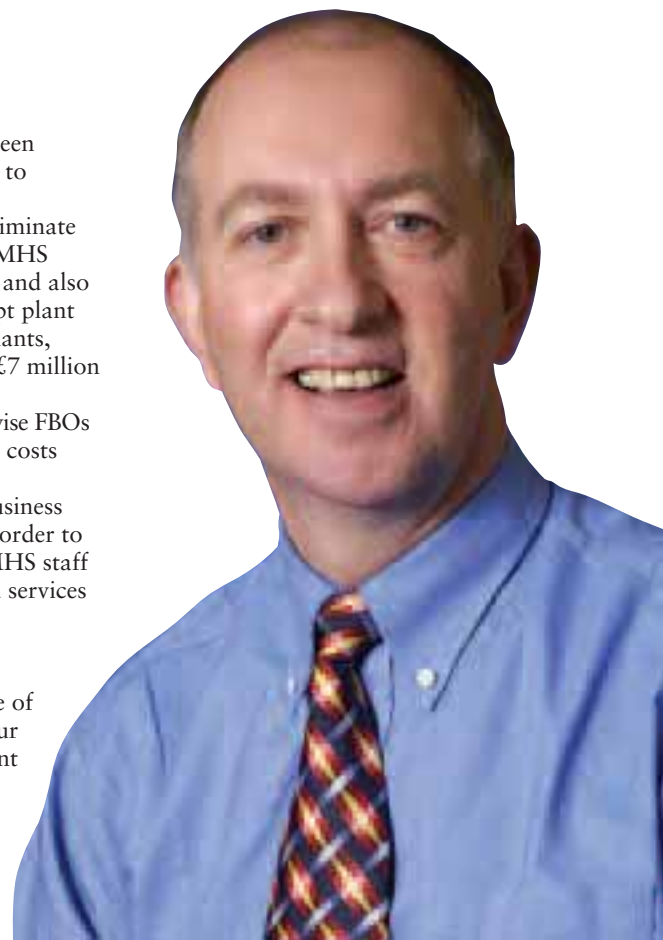
administrations. In particular, I'm really pleased about the positive collaborative working we're taking forward with sections of the industry, to identify areas where we can gain further efficiencies.

At the MHS, while we know there is still further to go, we believe we have demonstrated a willingness to change and that we have the capability and credibility to deliver on our vision. We've met all our transformation targets to date as well as delivering business as usual, including dealing with the impact of three significant animal disease outbreaks last year.

In order to achieve our goal of providing the most efficient service we can while maintaining consumer protection, we need the trust and support of our stakeholders.

I'm proud of the way my staff are responding to the challenges. I'm pleased with the way many in industry have engaged with us. Above all, I'm confident that by working together, we can achieve our goals and I'm really excited about the future.

Steve McGrath: confident of achieving goals



Keeping control of BSE

In addition to overseeing the MHS as an executive agency, the FSA has also been responsible for reviewing and monitoring the country's BSE controls. In 1996, prior to the FSA taking over this responsibility, the incidence of BSE in Great Britain had reached a high of 37,000. Last year it had fallen to 67. David Carruthers of the Agency's TSE Division puts the situation into perspective.

TSEs (transmissible spongiform encephalopathies) are a group of brain diseases that can affect animals and humans. The best known is BSE (mad cow disease). Scrapie is a TSE disease of sheep and goats. TSE diseases of humans include variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, which is thought to have resulted from transmission of BSE infection from cattle to humans, most probably through consumption of affected meat.

The key theme of the Agency's work on TSEs from its launch in 2000 has been to ensure that the controls in place to protect consumers from TSEs are adequate and reflect the risks.

In 2000, the Agency carried out an extensive review of the BSE controls and concluded that they should all remain in place and, in some cases, be strengthened. This review was followed in 2002 by a substantial review of the precautionary measures to reduce any risk to consumers from the possible presence of BSE in sheep and in 2003 by a review of the over thirty months (OTM) rule – a ban on almost all OTM cattle from entering the food supply. Each of these reviews was carried out in an open and public manner, in keeping with the Agency's core values.

The Agency keeps the TSE controls under continuous review as our knowledge of these diseases, and our understanding of the risks they pose, constantly changes as the science develops. In addition, the TSE controls are costly – at several thousand million pounds over the whole BSE epidemic – and therefore we need to ensure that they remain proportionate.

Steep decline in BSE

BSE in cattle has declined steeply from its peak in 1992, when there were 37,000 UK BSE cases, to only 67 cases in 2007. The corresponding decline in the risk to consumers enabled the Agency's review of the OTM rule to advise BSE testing as a more proportionate means of managing the risk from OTM cattle than an outright ban. However, the move to testing did not take place until November 2005, after the Agency had overseen the design and trial of the BSE testing system to ensure that it would operate reliably and effectively.

The move to BSE testing has allowed OTM cattle back into the food supply (except for cattle born before August 1996 when the feed ban became fully effective) provided they have tested negative for BSE. Since the change, nearly 1.1 million UK

cattle have been tested, with only 8 found to be positive. The change has been estimated to save the UK taxpayer over £220 million in costs per year of buying up and destroying OTM cattle and to have increased the returns to farmers from sale of these cattle by £80 million per year.

The decline in BSE has also allowed other changes, such as the recent lifting of the age at which vertebral column must be removed as specified risk material (SRM) and a move to more risk-based enforcement of SRM controls.

The Agency keeps the TSE controls under continuous review as our knowledge of these diseases, and our understanding of the risks they pose, constantly changes as the science develops

Scientific advances in recent years have enabled estimates of the possible level of BSE in sheep to be significantly improved. The use of sensitive rapid tests to screen sheep for TSE diseases, and the application of diagnostic tests capable of differentiating between scrapie and BSE, have enabled extensive surveillance to be carried out. This surveillance has not detected BSE in UK sheep. As a result there is a scientific consensus that, if BSE is present at all in sheep, it is at a low level.

Nevertheless a possibility that BSE may exist in sheep remains. The Agency therefore considers it prudent to maintain a contingency policy in case BSE is found in UK sheep. This possibility is also the reason why sheep continue to be subject to SRM controls.

The new diagnostic tests have also identified another related disease in sheep known as atypical scrapie, distinguishable from 'classical' scrapie and experimental BSE in sheep. Although there is an absence of evidence that atypical scrapie can be transmitted to humans or that it is of any risk to humans, the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee – which advises Government on TSE risk – has advised that



Careful monitoring and surveillance shows that instances of BSE in cattle in Great Britain have fallen from 37,000 a year in 1996 to a total of 67 last year. No sheep have been found to have BSE

Independent advice on Official Controls

I'm pleased to be chairing the Advisory Body on the Delivery of Official Controls on Meat Hygiene, writes Professor Patrick Wall. It is a challenging task to assist in the development of a more efficient meat inspection regimen.

Our 16-strong membership includes representatives from industry, such as the British Meat Processors Association, the British Poultry Council and the Association of Independent Meat Suppliers, the consumer organisation *Which?* and from DEFRA and the devolved administrations.

From the outset, the body has stressed that ensuring the protection of human health is paramount but production of safe food is only part of the story, ensuring consumers have confidence in both the commitment of this industry sector to produce safe food and the ability of the inspection regimen to oversee this sector are equally important.

Ensuring the protection of human health is paramount, but production of safe food is only part of the story

No part of the food chain is subject to the same degree of 'policing' and industry would like to see more consistency with other sectors. However, because of the legacy of BSE, and the current threats of *E. coli* O157, campylobacter and salmonella, changes in how the inspection regimen is delivered will have to be introduced slowly to ensure the same degree of consumer protection, and consumer confidence, is maintained.

The occurrence of outbreaks of foodborne disease associated with contaminated meat, food scares, and the identification of shoddy operators, undermines consumer confidence in meat as a safe and wholesome food, therefore it is everybody's interest that there is total engagement by all the stakeholders in the improvements being made.

Improving work practices

As I reported to the FSA Board recently, the advisory body considers work practices in both the inspection service and the industry can be improved and that the entire system needs to be 'transformed'. One current strand of joint MHS/FSA/industry activity is making a good start in this direction, looking at both variations in the cost of

inspections, and work practices, in plants with similar throughputs and identifying best practices that can be shared.

The advisory body recognises that charging, and especially the move towards full cost recovery, is a contentious issue and considers that it is unfair to expect industry to pay for any service that is more expensive than necessary, hence the importance of the MHS transformation programme.

The advisory body also believes that any decisions on the future delivery of Official Controls in the UK shouldn't just depend on how the MHS performs, they should also consider changes to the EU regulations themselves, changes in the UK industry and also look at practices in other Member States to see if there are lessons to be learnt.

Like the FSA, the advisory body wishes to see the production of safe meat in the UK for consumers and also a commercially viable UK industry. We look forward to continuing to advise the FSA Board as it makes key decisions on this important area over the coming months.

Further information:

For more about advisory body members and its meetings, go to: food.gov.uk/foodindustry/industrycommittees/abdoc/

such a risk cannot be ruled out. The Agency has taken the lead in informing the public about the identification of atypical scrapie and that a possibility that it may be a risk to human health cannot be excluded.

Continuing research

The Agency also continues to review and support research into TSEs in animals used for food. The Agency's research programme informs the development of enforceable controls and aims to protect the consumer from the possible risk of exposure to BSE infectivity from the food chain. It also provides information to help consumers to make a reasoned choice in low risk and scientifically unproven situations.

It will continue to be the Agency's task in future to ensure that the TSE controls are proportionate and based on sound science so that, as the risk from BSE declines, the controls are adjusted where appropriate while maintaining the current high level of consumer protection. It will be vital also to remain watchful for any new information that might affect our assessment of the risk from these diseases. The recent identification of different, albeit apparently rare, forms of BSE highlights the uncertainty that continues to surround them.

FURTHER INFORMATION

For more on BSE, and TSEs in general, go to: food.gov.uk/bse



Professor Patrick Wall: looking forward to continuing to provide the FSA Board with advice

The importance of partnership

Stuart Roberts, Director of the British Meat Processors Association (pictured right), says that for the Transformation Programme to work there will have to be a transformation in relationship between the Meat Hygiene Service and its partners.

The relationship between the meat industry, the MHS and the Food Standards Agency is a complex one that displays all elements ranging from an extremely positive partnership to potentially-destructive confrontation, he says.

It is easy to sit in a Food Standards Agency, British Meat Processors Association or MHS office and think about the corporate relationship we have in either a positive or negative light.

However, what is more important to both the industry and the enforcement body is the working relationship that is experienced in abattoirs and cutting plants throughout the country every day of the year.

One of the biggest problems in the past has been the high level of inconsistency that has existed. While some abattoirs have had a very good relationship – where the MHS team and abattoir team have worked together in a constructive manner – this has not been the case in all premises. It is easy for some people to feel that a ‘good relationship’ means that the MHS is not

being robust enough at enforcing meat hygiene regulations.

My own view is that a challenging but constructive relationship, in which there is a very open dialogue and a respect between the food business operator (FBO) and the enforcement official, will lead to much higher levels of compliance than in a relationship in which enforcement action and frequent prosecution has to be instigated to influence behaviour.

Prosecution should always be seen as a failure by all partners as it implies that other routes to compliance have failed.

Transformation project

Putting aside the plethora of issues related to charging, the current meat hygiene service transformation project will be far from successful if it does not create an atmosphere in which there is trust and respect between FBOs and their counterparts in the MHS.

This is relatively easy to write about when you are office-based in London or York, but is much harder to achieve in the fast moving production environment of a slaughterhouse. For me personally, this is why transformation must be much more than fine words discussed at board meetings or stakeholder groups. It is also important

for transformation not just to focus on the MHS. Any partnership, by definition, relies on two or more parties and, as such, FBOs must accept the part they need to play in transforming the current relationship – as must the FSA, whose approach to approvals and meat policy has a prevailing effect on the relationship. This will be a long road but the prize for everyone will be enormous.



Stuart Roberts: the prize for everyone will be enormous

Who audits the MHS?

The Audit Branch of the FSA's Local Authority Liaison Division audits the MHS, to check effectiveness of MHS delivery of Official Controls in approved meat establishments, identify areas for improvement and report good practice.

Themed assessment

Until 2007, the FSA assessed MHS performance against the *MHS Manual for Official Controls* using compliance audit. Now, the audit strategy is moving to a risk-based approach – auditors perform themed assessment of the MHS structures and systems supporting Official Controls delivery. These themes, contained in an annual audit plan, include last year's audits of specified risk materials (SRM) and vertebral column controls implemented by the MHS in approved premises.

Themed audits include assessing MHS headquarters in York and its central control systems and procedures. Follow-up work includes assessing and verifying the contractors that supply officials, such as vets, to the MHS, and working down through to a sample of approved establishments where MHS teams operate.

The audit findings feed into a summary report for the themed area being assessed. An action plan contains recommendations for the MHS. Actions in response to higher

priority recommendations are tracked to completion and a further follow-up audit may be carried out to verify the effectiveness of corrective action if the control area is considered high risk.

Good practice

The audit team also reports on good practice. MHS good practice shown in a meat plant is mentioned in the audit report for that premises. Good practice at a higher level, such as at MHS HQ worthy of wider dissemination, is included in the summary audit report.

Looking to the future

The MHS transformation impacts on key MHS delivery systems. This is reflected in this year's audit plan. In the first half of this year, it focuses on assessing systems at the FSA/MHS interface that impact on official controls delivery. As the new MHS systems of control start to embed in the second half of the year, FSA auditors will start to assess their effectiveness.

Looking to the future, John Cragg of the FSA Audit Branch says: ‘We want to take increasing assurance from the work of the MHS's own internal audit team. As FSA audit manager, I work closely with the MHS audit manager to ensure our teams' work is complementary and productive.’

Further information:

More about FSA audit of the MHS can be found at: food.gov.uk/foodindustry/meat/mhservice/performance/mhsaudits/
More about SRM themed audits can be found at: food.gov.uk/enforcement/auditscheme/srmaudit



This supplement was published by the Food Standards Agency in May 2008. For more about the Agency's newsletter, *FSA News*, contact the editor at: frank.chalmers@foodstandards.gsi.gov.uk
To subscribe to the newsletter, to receive printed or electronic copies, contact Celia Dunphy, tel: 020 7276 8829, email: celia.dunphy@foodstandards.gsi.gov.uk
For more on the Agency go to: food.gov.uk or: eatwell.gov.uk For more on the Meat Hygiene Service go to: food.gov.uk/foodindustry/meat/mhservice or telephone: 01904 455501