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**THE INTERNATIONAL PORTAL FOR FOOD SAFETY,
ANIMAL AND PLANT HEALTH**
(Information paper- May 2004)

THE NEED FOR THE PORTAL

1. The changing patterns of food and agricultural production, greater attention to the environmental impact of agriculture, emergence of new technologies and potential contaminants, increase in international trade, and a heightened consumer awareness of food safety and animal health issues have all combined to increase interest in global sanitary and phytosanitary measures.
2. This interest comes from international agencies; national trade, agriculture, food safety, environment and consumer protection services; international trading partners; and private sector organizations. Each requires reliable information on standards, regulations, scientific evaluations, and other supporting information whether to make decisions on trade-related issues or to prepare relevant regulations or measures.
3. Despite the broad level of interest, obtaining accurate and current information can be difficult. There are two common problems: 1) information may be difficult to locate, and 2) it may not always be clear which source represents the current official position on a given subject. A user may need to search the websites of a number of different international standard setting bodies to retrieve all the relevant information on a particular commodity or on a specific topic. The same scenario is repeated at the national level where standards, regulations, and related information may be spread across the websites of several agencies. Further, some valuable information may not currently be electronically available to the general public.

THE PURPOSE OF THE PORTAL

4. Based on the above considerations, FAO is leading an interagency initiative, involving the relevant international agencies, standard setting bodies and national authorities to develop and maintain an internet-based portal - **the International Portal on Food Safety, Animal and Plant Health** - which enables an authoritative search for current standards, regulations and other relevant official materials from a single search tool.
5. Some important user groups are expected to include:
 - those involved in promotion and enforcement of safe production and trade (relevant ministries, the commercial sector and development agencies)
 - international trade regulators (customs and SPS-related authorities)
 - WTO SPS inquiry points
 - (policy) researchers

6. The types of questions to be addressed by the portal include the following:
- **International standards** – what standards exist for a particular commodity or process?
 - **Scientific evaluations** – what supporting scientific evaluations underpin the international standards?
 - **Import regulations**– what are the technical regulations for import (of a particular commodity) into a given country or trade zone?
 - **Recent regulations** - what new regulations have been implemented or are planned which impact food safety, animal and plant health?
 - **Trade disputes, concerns and notifications** – which commodities or processes have led to international concerns being raised, between which trading partners and for what reasons?
 - **Risk analysis** – what official risk assessments have been published on a specific subject/about a particular commodity?
 - **Pest/disease reports** – what pests/diseases have been officially reported recently for a given country or trade zone?
 - **Contact points** – who are the official contact points in a given country for animal health, biosafety, food safety, plant health and WTO inquiries?
 - **Inspection/quarantine service** - how is the (country's) inspection/quarantine service organized?

DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS

Ownership

7. To date, systems created to collect and disseminate sanitary and phytosanitary information have had only limited success. Those interpreting official sources usually fail to satisfy as users need to revert to the original source to be confident that essential components have not been lost. Systems for countries and organisations to publish materials have been undermined by users failing to supply (or provide updates for) the requested data, often because material is already published elsewhere. With this in mind, the project aims **to avoid duplication of effort and minimise the cost of participation** by linking to existing sites wherever possible. At the same time, the portal offers publication facilities for any countries without pre-existing websites to allow them to post information that would not otherwise be available electronically.

Maintenance

8. One way of ensuring cost-effective maintenance of the information is to match the descriptions of content (keywords, document types, etc) used on official partner source sites to those in the portal. Data is then viewable through the portal based on how it is described by these sources. The quality of the information in the portal is therefore critically dependent on the quality of these descriptions, and on the mapping of these descriptions to the portal's own set of keywords and information types. A long-term goal of the portal would be the adoption of standard descriptions over time, by participating source sites.

Language

9. The portal makes documents available in whatever language it was supplied. The aim is to ensure a multilingual capacity by using a controlled vocabulary for the keywords describing the documents, translated into English, French and Spanish. In addition, the full text search feature of the portal will retrieve documents containing the requested search expression, independent of language considerations.

Accessibility

10. The portal has been designed to be as accessible as possible over slow internet connections. Although the portal is essentially a database-driven website, technology has been applied to ensure that commonly-retrieved pages are 'cached' to ensure that they are presented as if they were produced from a conventional static website

CURRENT STATUS OF THE PROJECT AND TIMETABLE

The project is being implemented in the following stages:

Develop a prototype and test with users

11. The portal currently (May 2004) contains content drawn from the three SPS-recognized standard setting bodies, as well as from CBD, FAO (including FAO's internal legislation and regulatory database (FAOLEX)), WHO, and WTO, in addition to demonstration 'nodes' of nearly 400 items from the US, a further 2,000 from the EU, and smaller data sets from selected developing countries. There are currently over 15,000 items referenced by the portal, each described using a set of keywords supported by a powerful free text search facility.
12. The portal has undergone testing within FAO and with partners from the content providers. Further work is planned over the coming months with external users from the user groups identified above.

Extension of international and national coverage

13. In addition, plans are in hand to include further EU and US information, as well as sample data sets from larger developing countries. Coverage will also be extended over the coming months by the progressive inclusion of supporting material to the official standards (for instance, more detailed information from the Joint FAO/WHO Expert Consultation on Food Additives and Contaminants (JECFA) and the Joint FAO/WHO Meeting on Pesticide Residues (JMPR)).

Launch Version 1.0 of the portal

14. The portal will formally be launched on 25 May, 2004, on the occasion of the FAO/WHO Regional Conference on Food Safety for Asia and the Pacific (Seremban, Malaysia, 24-27 May 2004). It is now freely accessible from the FAO Biosecurity PAIA webpage (www.fao.org/biosecurity) or directly from www.ipfsaph.org. Interested users are invited to utilise the portal, share the link with other users, and provide feedback to the FAO project team on the portal content and usability.

Provide capacity building assistance

15. A programme of capacity building integrated into existing capacity building efforts by the various agencies is planned to follow this launch, with further initiatives to be well coordinated between agencies. This will include:
 - building awareness and understanding of the benefits of information exchange to support safe trade;
 - development of national strategies for the exchange of official information;
 - assistance in the development of computing facilities and information management capacity to support information exchange;
 - human resource development and training sessions for national authorities on the use of the portal and data input and editing functionality; and

- tailored training sessions to targeted audiences of end users on the use of the portal.
16. Through this capacity building programme, it is envisaged that further arrangements can be made with other countries for automatic and/or manual loading of their national information.
 17. For further information on the portal please contact:

Mike Robson: IPFSAPH Project Manager
at Mike.Robson@fao.org

Niek van der Graaff: Chairman FAO Biosecurity Inter-Departmental Working Group
at: Niek.VanDerGraaff@fao.org

Ezzeddine Boutrif: Secretary FAO Biosecurity Inter-Departmental Working Group
at Ezzeddine.Boutrif@fao.org