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IMPROVING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF JAMAICA'S FOOD CONTROL SYSTEM
(Prepared by Jamaica)

The overall responsibility for food safety in Jamaica lies in three government agencies namely the Ministries of Health, Agriculture and Commerce and Technology. Within these ministries there are some key units or divisions that have a direct role for regulating food safety. The legal mandate to support the food safety functions of these ministries are found in some twenty pieces of legislations. With respect to the Ministry of Health the major legislations that speaks to food safety are the Food and Drugs Act (1964), the Public Health Act (1975) and the Pesticide Control Act, under these acts are the following regulations, Meat and Butchers Regulations of 1989, Food Handling Regulations 1999 with amendments in 2000, The Tourist Establishment Regulations and draft regulations in respect of Milk and Poultry. The Ministry of agriculture has several major pieces of legislations. These include The Meat and Meat products Export Act, 1999, The Aquaculture and Inland Marine Products and By-Products Inspection, Licensing and Export Act, 2000, The Animal Diseases and Importation Act 1948, Plant Quarantine Act. The Commerce and Technology Ministry administers the Labeling Act, Food Storage and Prevention of Infestation Act, Processed foods Act, 1973, that ministry is also responsible for the development of national food standards and codes of practices.

Apart from private Laboratories the government operates some eight Laboratories that conduct food analyses most of which are operated by the Ministries with responsibility for food safety to support their regulatory functions. Capacity exists for residues, chemical composition, and microbiological and toxicological analyses of foods.

The Ministry of Health has in place a national foodborne disease surveillance system as well as a hotel based travelers diarrhea surveillance system that monitors and investigates foodborne illnesses. This Ministry also regulates pesticide use and assesses the safety of nutritional supplements and nutraceuticals produced locally or imported.

Within the Ministry of Health, the Health Promotion and Protection Division and the Pesticide Control Authority have direct responsibility for food safety standards and regulations. In the Commerce, Science and Technology Ministry, the Bureau of Standards and Food Storage and Prevention of Infestation Divisions are involved in food safety while in the Ministry of Agriculture the Plant Quarantine and Veterinary Services Divisions are the responsible units.

The Jamaican Government has long recognized the need for coordination and consolidation of food safety activities and as far back as 1985 established a National Food Safety Committee in the Ministry of Health that brought together technical officers from the three ministries, private sector, international organizations and academia. This committee chaired by the Chief Medical Officer met

monthly. The national food safety coordinating committee represents the first formal initiative to bring stakeholders in food safety together at one table to discuss and explore ways to achieve interagency collaboration and coordination in food safety. This committee was instrumental in the development of guidelines for inter-agency coordination of the inspection of imported foods, prepared the first proposal for the establishment of a National Codex Committee (NCC) in Jamaica as well as the production of a series of food safety educational materials. This committee had no form of budgetary support and legal Authority to support its activities and hence was not very effective in addressing the fundamental issue of the coordination of food Safety in Jamaica. This committee functioned until 1999.

The Cabinet approved a National Quality Infrastructure Policy in 2001 to undertake work to develop a National Food Safety Policy for Jamaica as well as to determine a suitable institutional arrangement to ensure food safety and compliance with international agreements.

In order to fulfill this mandate, technical and financial support was provided from the Agricultural Support Services Project and another coordinating committee for food safety known as the National Agricultural Health and Food Safety Coordinating Committee (NAHFSCC) was established. This committee has been charged with the responsibility to establish and maintain a rational and integrated farm to table agricultural health and food safety system in Jamaica that harmonizes interagency efforts, minimize inter agency conflict and over lap, and ensure protection of public health in a manner consistent with WTO/SPS agreements.

The committee is comprised of Senior Technical Officers from the three ministries, representatives from Scientific Research Council, Bureau of Standards, University of the West Indies, Caribbean Food and Nutrition Institute (CFNI), FAO, IICA, Consumer Affairs Commission and Jamaica Exporters Association among others. The chairmanship of this committee is rotated between the three Ministries and is chaired by a technical officer nominated by the Permanent Secretary, each Ministry chairs the meetings for one year, the Agricultural Support Services Project (ASSP) hosts the secretariat. Again this coordinating committee has no legal authority. A memorandum of understanding removing overlaps was negotiated by the committee and signed by the three Ministers. However, the committee has already provided technical guidance toward the development of a National Foodsafety Policy, addressing the protection of human, animal and plant health and is designed to support the food safety programme. The key strategies articulated in the policy includes surveillance, risk analysis, establishment of a Food Safety Authority, establishment of a national laboratory accreditation body, research, training, public education and inspection. The policy clearly recommends a science-based approach to food safety and the application of the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) quality system to food production.

It has been recommended that the Food Safety Authority reside in the Ministry of Commerce, Science and Technology, and a governing body representing all stakeholder interests in food safety be established. The legislation will provide the mandate as well as the Authority of this body in the implementation and management of Jamaica's food safety programme. A phased approach is recommended for the implementation of the Food safety Authority. In phase one the governing body comprising representatives from each of the three Ministries, Attorney General Department, Private Sector Organization of Jamaica, Jamaica Manufacturers Association and academia will guide the set up and functioning of the food safety agency and should function for approximately one year. In the second year the Food Safety Authority will become fully operational with the requisite legislation to carry out its core functions. The major functions of the Food Safety Agency includes administering regulations applicable to food safety, coordination of all food inspection activities at designated points in the food chain, consumer education, resource mobilization, advising government on food safety matters and participating in national, regional and international work in food safety. The private sector involvement will include the establishment of approved quality assurance systems to safeguard products. In terms of

funding for the Food Safety Agency, it is expected to be supported mainly with Government subvention. The ASSP will provide resources to finance the secretariat in the first year and user fees from private sector will also be a major source of finance as the Food Safety Agency becomes fully operational. (A Cabinet Submission outlining the details of the establishment and functioning of the Agency will be taken to the Cabinet for approval within the next few weeks.)

In the interim the three Ministries have signed a memorandum of understanding to enhance coordination across agencies, reduce overlaps and address some gaps.

A laboratory accreditation program is well on the way and selected laboratories are implementing quality systems to gain accreditation.

Jamaica launched the establishment of its National Codex Committee (NCC) in December 2004 and now has working groups for Food Hygiene, Veterinary Drug Residues, Pesticide Residues, Food Labeling, and Meat and Fish Hygiene. These working groups are responsible for reviewing draft codex standards and prepare comments that are then submitted to the NCC for signing off before onward transmission to the Codex Alimentarius Commission via the Codex Contact Point (CCP). The CCP is located in the Bureau of Standards.

There is a SPS enquiry point located in the Ministry of Agriculture; they prepare SPS notifications for transmission to the SPS notification point located in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Enquiry point also prepares SPS newsletters containing relevant SPS notifications and circulates them electronically to all stakeholders and responds to requests for full texts etc.

The food Safety programme in Jamaica continues to receive much needed financial and technical support from international organizations such as WHO, FAO, IICA and PAHO.

The administrative reform of the food safety system in Jamaica currently in progress will serve to ultimately make for the efficient use of limited resources, better coordination of SPS issues and will be able to respond in a timely manner to the emerging challenges of globalization of the food trade, ensure safe food for the Jamaican consumers and access to international markets.