



FOOD AND AGRICULTURE  
ORGANIZATION OF THE  
UNITED NATIONS

WORLD HEALTH  
ORGANIZATION



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**Agenda item 3**

**PEC/CRD 04  
(rev.1)**

## **FAO/WHO PAN-EUROPEAN CONFERENCE ON FOOD SAFETY AND QUALITY**

*BUDAPEST, HUNGARY, 25 – 28 FEBRUARY 2002*

### **Food Safety and Quality in Europe – Summary of emerging issues and unresolved problems**

Conference Room Document prepared by the Conference Secretariat

*Note: This paper has been prepared by the Conference secretariat as a follow-up to the decision of the Conference's Executive Committee which requested FAO/WHO secretariat to prepare such a summary analysis to inform the discussion of the Conference's working groups.*

#### **1. Introduction**

Over the past decade food safety and quality issues in Europe have become extremely controversial and have drawn a high level of attention from the public in general and consumers' organizations in particular. Food safety and quality problems and the resulting health effects have, in many cases, compromised consumers' health, threatened the food supply and dented confidence in foods. In addition, in extreme cases, food trade has also been severely disrupted. The consequences of these problems have had wide-ranging impacts throughout the food chain, and have focussed attention on the problems and prompted substantial reforms in food production, regulation and control throughout Europe.

At the same time Europe has been expanding<sup>1</sup> and changing politically and economically. For example: developments in Eastern Europe towards market economies; the enlargement of the European Union and preparations for accession of new members; the establishment of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), and the globalisation of food trade. These regional and global developments have challenged all those involved in producing, supplying, regulating, trading and consuming food.

All links in the food chain - from the farm to the table - have been charged with responding to food safety and quality issues, to assure consumers of the safety and quality of their food, whatever its origin. At the same time, those producing and trading foods need to be assured that regulations are no more restrictive than necessary to ensure safe quality food, so that fair trade can be established throughout Europe, and with all other trading partners.

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<sup>1</sup> See **Appendix 1** for list of FAO and WHO members and observers in the European region

## **2. Aims of the Conference**

The agenda and documents for this Conference have been developed to focus on food safety and quality issues that are relevant for all the countries in the region, recognizing that the incentives for participation will be different - based on the specific situations and interests across the region.

The Conference is an important forum to identify problems/constraints, to exchange views, and to find solutions that are of significance to the region as a whole. However, at the onset, it should be recognized that it is beyond the scope of this Conference to address all the food safety and quality issues, for all the members of the FAO/WHO European Region.

Therefore the Conference and the authors of papers have concentrated on the identification and discussion of regional problems, and on useful and practical solutions to specific regional food safety and quality issues in the entire food chain. The aim is to be forward looking, to consider issues that concern the region as a whole, covering new areas of concern, and avoiding repetition of issues that have been dealt with in other fora.

The paper from Poland (PEC 01/4) focuses on the improvement of internal monitoring and surveillance methodologies as part of the move towards better harmonisation of practice in preparation for accession to the EU. The papers from France (PEC 01/03), the European Union (PEC 01/08), Hungary/the Netherlands (PEC 01/07) and from Sweden/Finland/the European Commission (PEC 01/06) are concerned with the future development of effective food safety policies. In doing so these papers raise issues about the appropriate balance between the scientific assessment of risks and the broader cultural and societal contexts in which those risks are set.

## **3. Food safety and food trade**

Food safety and quality are important parameters in protecting consumers' health. Food imperfections may lead to unacceptable health risks for consumers, and on a larger scale can also lead to food insecurity, market disturbances and severe trade restrictions. Therefore food safety and quality are also important parameters in supporting national and international food trade.

Currently more than 50% of world food trade is carried out by European countries (including internal EU trade). More than 85% of international European food trade is by countries of the European Union. But 70% of trade of the European Union is internal trade between EU members. Those European countries outside the EU barely participate in international trade and have limited access to international markets. Limited participation of Eastern European countries in international food trade may restrict their access to foods and nutrients necessary to complement local foods in providing a healthy nutritious diet.

There are several trade markets operating today within the European region, within the EC-market, EC trade with others in the European region, and trade with other countries outside Europe. In recent years the EC and World food trade has developed rapidly in size and impact. At the same time Central and Eastern European countries are acceding to the European Union. Presently some Central European countries are about to become a part of

the Union and some others are preparing themselves for accession: 13 countries have signed agreements of association with the EU and are in the process of negotiation.

To assist in the process of continued European integration and improvement of food safety and quality, cooperation is needed between all the partners involved throughout the food chain, Governments, and non-governmental organizations from the public and private sector. Different systems for legislating and controlling trade in safe foods have been developed by governments, international agencies, as well as private companies all over the world. Effective co-operation requires the exchange of policy information and the harmonization and strengthening of legislation and controls. Harmonized food safety policies, transparency of regulations and adequate capacity in food safety controls are important prerequisites for participation in international food trade.

Important tools to achieve these targets are the improvement of communication networks on policy development, identification of common research priorities and capacity building. The two Conference workshops will therefore focus on:

- 1) Co-operation in policy and research development in Europe, and
- 2) Co-operation in information and communication advancement.

#### **4. Food Safety - emerging issues and unresolved problems**

Food safety problems are so numerous and extensive in the region that no country is left unaffected. Some problems are isolated and short-term, others long-term and endemic. Health effects can be acute or chronic. Consumers can be willing to accept minor problems yet they can also be unforgiving with serious shortcomings in food safety. All food safety problems to some extent pose health risks. Some health problems are particularly acute, and some are more acute for some groups of vulnerable consumers such as the very young or those undernourished or in poor health.. In addition, the economic consequences of food safety failures can be enormous, for consumers if as a result they are temporarily or permanently unable to work, for the food industry and the economy at large. Therefore the improvement of food safety is a major goal throughout Europe.

Statistical information on the extent of foodborne diseases, both microbiological and chemical are detailed in the WHO paper (PEC 01/04). Changing patterns of microbiological and chemical hazards and contamination levels can be observed from the detailed surveillance data. This data is essential for effective risk assessments, and to monitor and target resources to combat these problems. It seems that as one food safety problem is tackled so others appear; for example, as salmonella is becoming effectively controlled in some countries so new threats, such as BSE emerge. Effective surveillance and monitoring is essential, as is a vigilant approach to the control and eradication of foodborne illness, whatsoever their source.

Food risks are often divided into specific types, and the Conference papers have highlighted many of these and appropriate methods for their control. They include:

- i. Microbiological risks, including those arising from food poisoning organisms
- ii. 'Chemical' risks including food additives; pesticide residues; residues of veterinary medicines; natural toxicants present either as an inherent part of the food (e.g. phyto-oestrogens) or present as a result of infection (e.g. aflatoxins); organic environmental contaminants (e.g. PCBs and dioxins); inorganic contaminants (e.g. lead and

- cadmium); migrants from packaging and other materials and articles in contact with food; and vitamins and minerals
- iii. Emerging risks from other agents that may have entered the food supply, such as BSE, animal zoonoses, antibiotic resistance,
  - iv. 'Novel' risks such as those from novel foods and novel food processing and the use of GMOs
  - v. Risks from radioactivity in food
  - vi. Other risks associated with food itself, such as under or over-nutrition.

In addition, there are risks that may be specific to certain individuals or groups within the population, such as from allergic and other idiosyncratic reactions to foods and food components, or risks to particularly vulnerable groups such as children, the elderly, the undernourished or immunosuppressed.

Allergies and allergic reactions, which can prove fatal, are an emerging issue causing concern since they are increasing significantly in the western world. There is a scope for further exchanges of information on the occurrence of these reactions in different European countries.

It is clear from the examples cited in the Conference papers that implementation of effective regulations and controls can reduce and minimise the risks of many of these food safety problems. However, within the risk assessment process, while science provides the foundation for risk analysis, risk management and risk communication need wider inputs for effective strategies and harmonised policies for risk reduction. The interpretation of science (from the risk assessment) into overall policy (risk management and risk communication) can be controversial, open to debate and to different cultural interpretations depending on acceptable levels of risk and precaution. Yet these are the basis of the essential principles for regulation and control, for effective agreed strategies to protect consumers' health from unsafe food, and to ensure that food trade operates fairly in open markets.

The particular strength of risk analysis is that it provides a framework in which both the scientific assessment of food risks and the relative importance of the risks, with particular regard to public perception, are combined in a system which properly recognises the need to take due account of both. In addition, the importance of the participation of all stakeholders in the risk analysis process is recognised, paying particular attention to consumers' views as major stakeholders. The provision of consumer information and the participation in interactive communication with consumers on food safety, risks and food quality is discussed in the paper (PEC 01/11) from BEUC - the European consumers' association.

Should food safety measures and controls fail it is vital that emergency procedures are considered. These might involve issuance of safety alerts, and, if appropriate, temporary restriction to trade. These issues, addressing food safety failures and the identification and monitoring of emerging food risks, are discussed in the papers of the European Commission (PEC 01/08), the Netherlands and Romania (PEC 01/09), and FAO (PEC 01/10).

## 5. Co-operation in policy and research development in Europe

Despite recent advances and investments in research on food safety and quality, many problems persist. In some cases, in some countries, it is evident that food safety problems are increasing and causing more foodborne diseases. However, other countries have been able to reduce food problems through a number of initiatives, such as those employed in Sweden and Finland to control *Salmonella* in poultry. Experience shows that successful control of food problems are predicated on engaging considerable investments in research and on the development of effective policies and strategies to control, manage and prevent these risks.

Governments are individually responsible for their policies, yet foodborne diseases know no frontiers and many of the causes and problems are the same throughout the Region. The need and benefit for coordinated actions and policies is evident, especially to ensure trade between and within different markets. Within the EU collaboration in policy and research development, working towards harmonization throughout the Community, has had significant benefits for trade and for ensuring consistent approaches and policies towards the protection of consumers' health.

Further afield harmonization of food standards and regulation on a global basis is the work of the FAO/WHO Codex Alimentarius Commission. Codex is one of the international reference bodies that WTO can refer to when trying to resolve trade disputes. Recently Codex has been focussing on further defining and clarifying its principles for decision-making, taking into account other legitimate factors for the health protection of consumers, and working principles for risk analysis (including precautionary approaches). Within Codex the Regional Coordinating Committee for Europe can address specific issues throughout the region.

At the international level harmonized policies that facilitate coordinated approaches to food safety ensure that food trade can progress unhindered, and that there are common safety standards. The assessment of risks based on sound science is critical to such harmonized policies, as are consistent approaches to managing risks. At the national level governments may however decide that it is necessary to adopt higher levels of health protection for consumers - if there is a greater health risk within their jurisdiction. Nevertheless, unfair barriers to trade restrictions on the importation of food can be referred to the WTO disputes procedure.

The incentives for harmonizing and strengthening of food safety legislation and control are evident for the effective operation of global and regional food trade. Western European countries should be encouraged to help the countries of Central and Eastern Europe in capacity building; FAO and WHO should co-ordinate and facilitate these developments.

Scientific research, as a tool for solving food safety problems, and as the basis for credible risk assessment is vital. Research development is expensive and needs considerable investment of financial and human resources. Collaboration has been shown to be effective within the EU and with accession countries, as demonstrated by the experiences discussed in the paper from the Netherlands and Hungary (PEC 01/07). Networking and setting research priorities beyond national boundaries to solve common problems is the way forward for many countries where resources need to be capitalized.

Capacity building in food control systems and for policy development and implementation is vital to reach common goals and open markets. The ongoing enlargement of the European Union will make co-operation with Eastern Europe a precondition for further development in the region as a whole. Capacity building should concentrate on the exchange of knowledge and information in policy and research development.

## **6. Future considerations and conclusions**

Conclusions are focussed on two key areas which require cooperation between all stakeholders if progress is to be achieved:

- a. policy and research development, and
- b. information and communication advancement.

It is expected that recommendations will be proposed by both workshops to address these concerns, recognizing that political commitment will be needed to ensure that the recommendations are acted upon. The workshop discussions may be expected to lead to the identification of further ways in which co-operation in policy research development and information and communication advancement could be facilitated, drawing upon the papers presented in the plenary session and the additional conference room documents tabled.

In both areas, consideration could be given to development of concrete pilot projects, within the region, to address the major issues raised and to facilitating

- (a) improved policy and research development, and
- (b) communication and information advancement.

FAO and WHO could be asked to take the lead in the identification and formulation of such pilot projects.

FAO, WHO and their member countries have developed much knowledge in the field of food safety and quality policies. However, diversity in regulation, control and enforcement is a major hindrance to trade and to inconsistent health standards. Key incentives are transparency and harmonization of regulations and controls, involving all stakeholders throughout the food chain.

Because of increasing levels of trade between European countries make it has become essential to establish effective information exchange and communication regarding food safety issues among different countries, including sharing of the results of food surveillance; emerging problems; food alerts; scientific advances; policy developments; consumer concerns; etc. Information and communication is vital between all stakeholders in the food chain and with all trading partners to identify, manage and control, food risks.

Food safety problems do not respect national boundaries. Increasing trade also brings with it an increasing risk that food safety problems will be transported across state boundaries. This is a concern for microbiological risks particularly associated with processed foods. The success of control techniques such as HACCP depends on producers and manufacturers throughout the food chain taking responsibility for safety and co-operating to identify and control the critical points, throughout all stages in the food chain.

Other food risks including those as a result of environmental pollution and contamination, biological agents and chemical contaminants also show no respect for national boundaries: in

many cases regional approaches are necessary, and these should be proactive as well as reactive. There are already existing systems in the EU for the rapid alert of problems and sharing of information networks. The possibilities of extending these systems further are developed in the papers, particularly the EC paper on its Rapid Alert System (PEC 01/08), and in the FAO proposal to provide a single mechanism - the Biosecurity Portal - for the exchange of official information on food safety, animal and plant health, (PEC 01/10).

A new emphasis and approach is needed to re-establish consumer confidence in food safety and quality whereby there is an improved interactive dialogue with scientists, risk managers, consumers and consumer organizations, to promote better mutual understanding and better risk communication. An increase in the public understanding of science through initiatives to communicate and disseminate the findings directly to consumers is necessary, as is full transparency in scientific advice and in the decision making process. Effective two-way communication with consumers is necessary on an ongoing basis where food safety issues are concerned.

It is clear from some of the examples cited in the Conference papers that in many cases effective strategies have been employed to reduce foodborne risks. There are many examples of the effective management and control of food risks such as the reduction of Salmonella infections, and chemical contamination. Yet it is also clear from the WHO data that not all countries have been able to learn the lessons and employ 'best practice' to attain the levels that some countries have been able to achieve.

There is great potential for expanding systems for the exchange of information between countries, and for developing new systems and networks of information exchange to improve all aspects of food safety in the European region. Some recent examples of institutional and scientific co-operation, networking and capacity building in the field of food safety and quality are presented in the paper of Hungary and the Netherlands (PEC 01/07).

In order that emerging food safety problems are promptly and properly addressed, and limited resources are effectively used, modern information and surveillance systems for foodborne diseases should be built, developed or strengthened, as appropriate.

Consideration could be given to expanding the existing tools in EC so that Non-EU countries could be more involved in the development of rapid alert systems. FAO and WHO could co-ordinate their activities and give more attention to the development of projects to facilitate improved information and communication advancement.

## APPENDIX 1

**Pan-European Conference on Food Safety and Quality  
Budapest, Hungary, 25 – 28 February 2002****FAO and WHO members of the European region**

Albania	Italy
Armenia	Latvia
Austria	Lithuania
Azerbaijan	Luxembourg
Belgium	Moldova
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Monaco
Bulgaria	Netherlands
Croatia	Norway
Cyprus	Poland
Czech Republic	Portugal
Denmark	Romania
Estonia	San Marino
European Community	Slovak Republic
Finland	Slovenia
France	Spain
Georgia	Sweden
Germany	Switzerland
Greece	The Federal Republic of Yugoslavia
Hungary	The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia
Iceland	Turkey
Ireland	United Kingdom
Israel	

**Additional member-countries of the WHO European region:**

Belarus  
Kazachstan (also FAO member)  
Kyrgyzstan (also FAO member)  
Russian Federation  
Tajikistan (also FAO member)  
Turkmenistan (also FAO member)  
Ukraine  
Uzbekistan (also FAO member)