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Strengthening Official Food Safety Control Services
(Prepared by the United States of America)

Background: Food safety control services are the competent authorities to regulate the safety of food in a national food safety system. While it is the responsibility of industry to provide food that is safe and suitable for consumption, it is the responsibility of government national food safety control services to enforce relevant food safety regulations and to take appropriate actions to protect consumers from unsafe foods.

Discussion: Food safety control services need to be based on strong, flexible, science-based laws and on industry's legal responsibility to produce safe foods.

National control services do not necessarily need to grow in size in order to be strengthened. Clear legal authority, effective regulations, and comprehensive regulatory systems are fundamental. When violations occur, enforcement actions need to be consistent, science- and risk-based, and strategically directed to ensure better compliance by industry as a whole. The food safety control services need to have sufficient authority and resources to make a swift and certain action when a food safety risk is encountered.

Development of a national food safety strategy is a useful tool in determining how to strengthen existing food safety control agencies and their programs. In addition, knowledge of how other countries carry out their systems can provide invaluable information for use in strengthening one's own national food safety controls. Industry programs may also be instructive. For example, Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points (HACCP) programs, for example, have become popular in many parts of the world. The principles of HACCP systems are important in understanding industry versus government responsibilities, whether or not HACCP systems are required in a particular country or for a particular food sector.

Finally, import and export control systems frequently offer the greatest challenge to national governments, as domestic food safety controls are more difficult to enforce outside national borders. Current certification systems need to be examined to see if they are achieving their food safety goals.

Conclusion: All countries should periodically review their food safety control systems and services. Recently, especially since the implementation of the World Trade Organization's Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (WTO SPS) in 1995, many countries have reviewed their official food safety controls to assure they operate within the WTO SPS obligations. The topic papers under this theme relate to these obligations and to the practical aspects of operating food safety systems. The United States will offer specific comments in response to each of these topics.