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**NATIONAL FOOD SAFETY SYSTEM IN ANTIGUA AND BARBUDA**  
*(Prepared by Antigua and Barbuda)*

**BACKGROUND:**

We commence our discussion of food safety in our twin island state of Antigua and Barbuda with a brief discussion of the historical background. At the time of European settlement, with an African workforce, possibly three centuries ago, we see a society which was essentially agrarian, and one which combined the production, processing, and preparation of foods utilizing both European and African practices, and with cautionary awareness of problems peculiar to a tropical climate and environment. Over this period of our history, population growth was modest and the use of domestic foodstuffs and 'tried-and-true' food safety practices essentially assured a reasonably acceptable quality of life.

However, this stability was endangered following World War II, with an increase in global 'activity' such as air and marine transport, tourism, and global commerce. This increased activity led to changes in food use habits, higher incidence of disease transfer, increased use of questionable water supplies, substantial reliance on agro-chemistry, and other practices affecting food safety.

The result of all of this is that the Office of the Ministry of Health, Central Board of Health now finds that the historic, routine practices of food safety regulation, which had their genesis in colonial times, are no longer sufficient to protect our citizens and our environment. It is our belief, that it is time to take a 'systems approach' to food safety, involving many community stakeholders, and leading to a thorough, proactive program of food safety management. To begin this process we had a 'Prime Minister's Food Safety Initiative' in 2001, through which we sought to get support from the political directorate and all sectors whose mandates impact upon food safety.

**CURRENT FOOD SAFETY PROGRAMME**

The Central Board of Health, a division of the Ministry of Health, administers the current programme as follows:

**(I) Food Safety Inspections:**

The Ministry of Health, Central Board of Health makes routine inspections in four separate and distinct areas of food handling, management, and service:

- (A) Food Service:
  - Restaurants, bars, and snack shops

- Bakeries
  - Hotels (separate Food Safety Section)
  - Supermarkets, groceries, and retail shops
  - Wholesale shops
  - Itinerant Vendors (street food vending, both routine and special events)
  - Ice cream parlours
- (B) Ports of Entry:
- St. John's Deep Water Harbour
  - V.C. Bird International Airport
  - Other ports of entry, e.g. English Harbour (N.B. Inspectors in Barbuda do the inspections at the Barbuda port of entry)
- (C) Meat Inspections:
- Southern Area
  - Southeastern Area
  - Ante-mortem
  - Post-mortem
- (D) Public Market Inspection
- Vegetable and fruit
  - Meat
  - Fish

Rather than a command-and-control regulatory process, we essentially work in a cooperative manner with the industry, making a pro-active effort to gain their cooperation and compliance with accepted methods through education, training and management oversight. Only seldom is reliance placed on pre-emptive action to force compliance or shutdown. As a regulatory agency, the Ministry of Health, Central Board of Health institutes the **Safe Food Chain Principle** which has as its objectives...

- Safe Source
- Safe Storage
- Safe Preparation
- Safe Serving

Every effort is made to gain cooperative improvement and maintenance of food sanitation through various methods:

- Thorough and frequent inspections
- Follow-up inspections
- Compliance Schedules
- Reports and correspondence, with distribution
- Meetings and discussions
- Personnel education and training
- Public awareness
- Enforcement of legislation and regulation

**(II) Food Safety Surveillance:**

While frequent routine inspections are the keystone to the food safety programme, it is also necessary that surveillance be continual and widespread. Food Safety personnel are constantly reminded of this necessity and are urged to document any events or occurrences outside normal inspection but which require monitoring or follow-up action. These matters are brought to the attention of supervisory personnel. However, there is a need for wider surveillance on a more diverse group of activities, and for additional personnel and funding to assure more intensive coverage.

**(III) Regulatory Authority:**

Currently, the practices and enforcement actions undertaken by the Ministry of Health, Central Board of Health are intended to comply with the appropriate Public Health ordinance, as well as the Animals International Movement of Disease Act. No. 34 of 1986.

It is indeed timely, given the current worldwide concern on animal-borne diseases, that our Government is giving serious attention to food safety at this point. A major intent of the Government's Food Safety Initiative is to review legislation and regulation.

Food Inspectors must have the legislative authority and the regulatory guidance necessary to carry out their duties. Furthermore, the Ministry of Health, Central Board of Health and its officers must be granted the governmental status and public esteem that this important work entails.

**(IV) Training and Registration of Food Handlers:**

Among the important efforts of the Ministry of Health, Central Board of Health is that of training and registration of food handlers. The safe preparation and serving of food depends primarily upon the quality of service provided by these individuals.

The degree of labor turnover, the quality of personnel hygiene, and the physical handling and protection of foods are all-important. It is a "given," in a tourist-oriented economy that these individuals play a most important role. Hence, the Ministry of Health, Central Board of Health recognizes the need for an on-going organized program of training and registration. The problem is compounded by the presence of street food vendors in the informal economy

**(v) Restaurant Closures:**

While the Ministry of Health, Central Board of Health and other agencies make every effort to work in cooperative fashion with food service establishments, recognizing both their place in our tourist-oriented economy and the fact that employment of our citizens is important, it is our mandate of public health protection that occasionally requires that serious and demonstrative action be taken.

It is important to note, because it demonstrates the Ministry of Health - Central Board of Health procedures, that the facilities were closed to allow for correction, followed by a re-inspection for compliance, and a concurrent program of on-the-job training for food handlers.

The table below recites the deficiencies that mandated closure and extra training.

**(V) Routine Inspection of Food Service Establishments:**

As mentioned previously, the routine inspection of food service establishment is the keystone of food safety. These inspections are not made in a vacuum, but rather are all-inclusive of a cooperative basket of discussions with management, inspections made jointly with management and employees, documentation of findings and sharing of information, and training programs.

The table below provides the technical details involved in the year 2000 inspections.

**CONTRIBUTING/HIGH RISK FACTORS TO FOOD BORNE ILLNESS FOUND IN 183  
FOOD SERVICE ESTABLISHMENT INSPECTED IN 2000**

SPECIFIC FACTORS	PERCENTAGE	NUMBER
Unsafe Food Holding Temperature	43	79
Poor Personal Hygiene	29	53
Potential for Cross Contamination	57	105
Unsanitary dishware and equipment	31	56
Infected Food Handlers	2	3
Improper Food Handling	31	56
Improper Food Storage	11	20
Insects and Rodents Infestation	80	147
Chemicals Stored near food	5	9
Lack of hand washing facilities	48	88
Lack of Food Handling Medical Certificate	65	119

\* Percentage exceeds 100 because more than one factor was found in a single establishment.

**(VII) Ports of Entry:**

Ports of Entry (POE) play an important role in food safety. It is important to note that changes in global trade and transport are rapidly expanding the significance of these facilities. Probably more than anything else, the Ports of Entry will affect organization, workload, and labor requirements of the Ministry of Health - Central Board of Health. With V.C. Bird International Airport as the regional hub for eastern Caribbean air traffic, our role becomes extended, both in terms of food safety and other areas of concern. One very recent example is the global concern of air transport transmission of animal husbandry diseases from Europe.

The St. John's Deep Water Harbour requires serious inspections and changes, not only in the area of food safety, but in a variety of environmental areas. The plans under the Marpol Convention for Antigua to accept a wide variety of solid and liquid wastes from shipboard are examples of the need for a total reassessment of the Port. Additionally, there is the all-important concern for aesthetics in a tourist-oriented economy.

One item of paramount importance, which may be considered outside the province of food safety, is the need for a pro-active program of public water back-flow prevention and the prohibition of any means of cross connections that could compromise food safety.

**(VIII) Animal Slaughter:**

Slaughtered animals are inspected at the abattoir.

**AN EXPANDED FOOD SAFETY PROGRAM FOR ANTIGUA AND BARBUDA:**

**a) Existing problems:**

- A shortage of available scientific data to support the establishment of food safety standards that are harmonized with international standards;
- Food safety standards are of low priority in both public and private sectors;
- A lack of leadership regarding the development of a systems approach, possibly because of the present nature of the Government's structure;
- For reasons cited above, insufficient national commitment to food safety and protection;
- The lack of a current inventory and analysis of relevant laws and regulations;
- A corresponding lack of coordination and defined responsibility among departments and agencies;
- Lack of current and relevant information vis-à-vis food safety and disease correlation.

These shortcomings manifest themselves in serious way in the society. In addition to morbidity and mortality caused by food-borne and water-borne diseases, tremendous economic costs are incurred by individuals, the family, the health care system, the economy and society at large. Examples of these costs are loss of personal and commercial income caused by absenteeism, the cost of medical and pharmaceutical services, the bureaucratic costs of investigating disease outbreaks, and the income loss, judicial fines, and legal expenses incurred in the closure of businesses. And 'hidden' costs such as loss of customers and reputation are additional.

**b) Our Goal:**

To provide safe, wholesome, and adequate foods based upon an integrated participatory program of cooperation and regulation of foods, from production through consumption, thereby minimizing by all practical means the nature, incidence, and severity of food-related illness or trauma; and to ensure thereby a healthy citizenry and a vigorous, growing, and sustainable tourism industry of benefit to the nation and its people.

**c) The following will facilitate the achievement of this goal:**

- (1) Development of a cooperative working relationship between private and public sectors which will assure the meeting of our goal;
- (2) Development of an integrated program of policy, regulation, and implementation strategies which will protect and enhance domestic food production and assure the quality of food imported;
- (3) Development of a pro-active program of monitoring of the agricultural and marine environment as it may affect food production and use; and
- (4) Development of structured programs in order to assure annual assessment and long-term viability;
- (5) A strengthened epidemiological surveillance;
- (6) Risk analysis systems.

The following are crucial as we proceed to develop a better food safety system:

- Garnering a broad base of political, civic, business, and educational support;

- Determining how we will build capacity in training, implementation, monitoring, private-public cooperation, and regulating;
- Establishing a system of on farm controls with regards to food production, through the Extension services;
- Risk analysis systems.

**d) Proposed components of food safety programme:**

The following items that should be considered in an **integrated** food safety programme by a diverse group of individuals who represent all aspects of the nation's society. Hereinafter is a suggested listing of components for an effective Food Safety Programme:

- 1) **A possible administrative re-structuring** based upon the separate headings of: -
  - a) Human health
  - b) Plant health
  - c) Animal health
- 2) **A state-of-the-art laboratory facility**, staffed to monitor and analyze long-term trends in matters related to human, plant and animal health and also capable of reacting to emergency situations.
- 3) **A professional Food Safety Inspection Service** under continual training and a system of rotation to assure alert and competent surveillance and documentation, preferably under Civil Service.
- 4) **A program of oversight and licensing of street-vended foods** involving training, equipment checks, and monitoring.
- 5) **Passing the Food Safety, Plant Health and Animal Health Acts into law.**
- 6) **An early and thorough analysis of existing training programs** in food production, food preparation, and food handling, for improved capacity-building.
- 7) **An early exploration of how the medical profession** should interface with Government staff involved in implementing a Food Safety Programme.
- 8) **A detailed analysis of the interrelationship and role of all Government agencies** whose duties involve oversight of operations relative to soil, water, and foodstuffs.
- 9) **The development of hazard analysis critical control point (HACCP), risk assessment, risk analysis, and risk communication** for the benefit of the nation's public health and environment protection in relation to food safety.
- 10) **The development of an integrated, professional information systems** for documentation of factual information, detection of trends or problems, dissemination of health and safety information, and cooperation with international agencies. A fundamental purpose of this information system would be to provide on-going, routine, and timely information to policy-makers, regulatory personnel, and the private sector.

- 11) The development of an organized program of interfacing between the National Food Safety Committee and the nation's education system and media in order that the Prime Minister's Food Safety Initiative evolves to the full benefit and well-being of the community, its health and its economy.
- 12) Community participation.

## **IMPROVED LEGISLATIVE CAPACITY**

In Antigua and Barbuda, the governing legislation for managing animal health, plant health and food safety on the farm-to-table continuum, is obsolete, inadequate, or completely absent. Various pieces of legislation, too numerous to list, govern food safety. Consequently, Antigua and Barbuda was assisted by the Pan-American health organization with a project to modernize its national legislation on animal, plant and food, these legislations embrace the general food quality criteria such as good agricultural practices (GAPs), and good manufacturing practices (GMPs), and facilitate the process by which the food industry can be stimulated to introduce modern, improved technology in a safe food environment. All existing and relevant laws have been reviewed and updated. A summary of the various pieces of legislation is presented. Several national consultations have been held on these legislations and submissions have been made to WTO for comments by member countries.

## **FOOD SAFETY ACT**

### **Description of content:**

This Bill proposes to regulate the sale of food by *Food Businesses*, which produce, process, manufacture or otherwise handle food, including street vending, as well as import and export food into or from Antigua and Barbuda. The aim of regulating Food Businesses is to protect human food and food sources from “food hazards”, “food safety risks,” and “food-borne diseases.”

This Bill is divided into ten parts, namely:

PART I	Preliminary
PART II	Administration and Enforcement
PART III	Inspection, Seizure and Forfeiture
PART IV	Registration and Licensing Requirements
PART V	Standards
PART VI	Import and Export of Food
PART VII	Food Hazards and Food Borne Diseases
PART VIII	Offences and Penalties
PART IX	Regulations and Orders
PART X	Miscellaneous and Supplemental

Part V of the Bill deals with Standards. Clause 23 empowers the Food Authority to make standards for food businesses, food facilities and equipment used in connection with such businesses, in consultation with the Bureau of Standards. Clause 23 (2) mandates that the standards incorporate international safety criteria agreed by Antigua and Barbuda. Under Clause 23 (4) the National Food Safety Committee will review all standards made before they are published.

Under Clause 24, Operators of Businesses will, after the commencement of this Act, be required to submit to the Food Authority, a "Notice of Intention to Import/ Export Food" into or out of Antigua and

Barbuda. The notice is set out as Form 1 in the Fourth Schedule. If the notice relates to a particular importation, it should be accompanied by a Certificate of Compliance from the country of origin. The signed written contract between the exporter in the country of origin and the importer in Antigua and Barbuda must also be presented to the Food Authority.

If the notice of intention relates to a particular food export from Antigua and Barbuda, such notice of intention must be accompanied by a written confirmation from the relevant Food Authority in the importing country.

Clause 27 spells out the functions of the Food Authority in those instances where food samples are taken and sent to an analyst. Where the results of analysis prove that the food is in compliance with the provisions of the law, the Food Authority is required to give notice to the Customs Division, the Exporter or Importer as the case may be, and to afterwards order the release of the food for importation or exportation.

If the sample results indicate that the food does not comply with the requirements of this law, then the Food Authority is required to issue a "Notice of Detention" to the Customs Division, and to the Importer or Exporter, as the case may be, advising the agencies of the detention of the food until the condition specified in the Notice of Detention is met to the satisfaction of the Food Authority. A copy of a Notice of Detention is set out in the Fifth Schedule to this Act.

Clause 28 is a penalty clause and Importers or Exporters of food into or out of Antigua and Barbuda who contravene the provisions of this Act will, after summary conviction, be fined, imprisoned or be both fined and imprisoned.

Clause 29 gives the Minister the power to publish in the *Gazette* some categories of foods, which usually require inspection by an Inspector on importation into Antigua and Barbuda or before exportation from Antigua and Barbuda.

The Bill provides under Clause 32 that, within six months of the commencement of this Act and forty-five days after the end of each year, every person who imports or exports food should submit a report to the Food Authority on their activities for the previous calendar year. The report should include food shipments, quantities of food imported or exported, a summary of incidents or accidents regarding food, and some indication of foods imported which did not meet with the statutory requirements of the importing country.

## **PLANT HEALTH ACT**

### **Description of content:**

This Act aims at preventing the introduction and control to the spread of plant pests; to protect plant resources to facilitate trade in plants and plant products; to regulate other matters connected thereto; the designation and operation of the National Plant Protection Organization (NPPO); to define the functions of the NPPO and to regulate other matters connected thereto.

The Act consists of eight (8) parts namely,

- PART I – General
- PART II – Administration
- PART III – Import
- PART IV – Containment and Eradication of Pests
- PART V – Phytosanitary Certification
- PART VI – Enforcement



PART VII – Offences

PART VIII – Miscellaneous

The Act contains seventeen (17) schedules, namely:

1. Quarantine Pests of Antigua and Barbuda
2. Regulated Non-quarantine Pests of Antigua and Barbuda
3. Commodities and their Import Requirements
4. Prescribed Ports of Entry for Plants, Plant Products and Other Regulated Articles
5. Pest Free Areas and Areas of Low Pest Prevalence
6. Phytosanitary Certificate
7. Import Permit
8. Costing Methods for Treatment or Destruction of Plants, Plant Products or Other Regulated Articles
9. Fees
10. Fixed Penalties
11. Detention Certificate
12. Spoilage Certificate
13. Quarantine Notice & Confiscation Certificate
14. Declaration to be signed by Captain
15. Plant Protection Identification
16. Requirements for Port Facilities
17. Emergency Action Plan for Exotic Plant Pests & Diseases

## **ANIMAL HEALTH ACT**

### **Description of content**

This Bill proposes to regulate the movement of animals into and out of Antigua and Barbuda with the aim of preventing and controlling the spread of certain prescribed animal diseases. The Bill also seeks to ensure that animals are imported into, or exported from Antigua and Barbuda in a safe and humane manner.

The Bill is divided into eight (8) Parts and fifty-seven Clauses, namely:

- |           |   |
|-----------|---|
| PART I    | Preliminary   |
| PART II   | Administration  |
| PART III  | Importation and Exportation of Animals and Animal-Related Items |
| PART IV   | Animal Quarantine   |
| PART V    | Control and destruction of Diseased Animals                     |
| PART VI   | Powers of Inspectors  |
| PART VII  | Enforcement   |
| PART VIII | Legal and General   |

Clauses 11 to 13 of the Bill deal with import permits, the inspection of animal and animal products at ports of entry and the times for such inspection. The Bill makes provision under Clause 13 for emergency inspection of goods in transit through Antigua and Barbuda or for perishable goods to be inspected on an application by the importer.

Clause 14 gives wide powers to Inspectors at ports of entry to deal with animal and animal related goods, which arrive without the relevant documentation, or where such goods pose a threat to the spread of disease. Inspectors' powers include: treatment or disinfection, re-exportation, confiscation or destruction after the importer is duly notified.

Where the animal or goods remain unclaimed for two or more weeks, the costs associated with the destruction of the animal or animal-related items shall be borne by the importer, except in special circumstances where the Government assumes responsibility for the costs incurred.

Clause 15 is a penalty Clause and any person who imports an animal or animal related item into Antigua and Barbuda without the necessary permit, or who contravenes terms or conditions contained in an import permit, commits an offence punishable on summary conviction to a fine of \$5000.00 or imprisonment for 2 years. The Authority is also empowered to forfeit the goods to the State, to retain or destroy, or to otherwise dispose of as the Minister may direct.

Clause 16 spells out the procedure to be followed where any person seeks to export animal or animal related items from Antigua and Barbuda. The exporter must ensure that documentation, fees and certificates for export are in order. Under Clause 17, the Bill imposes a duty on the Minister to ensure the safe and humane treatment of animals to be moved from Antigua and Barbuda. Furthermore, the Minister may delay the departure of an animal pending an investigation and, in extreme cases, may order the destruction of the animal to prevent the spread of a prescribed disease.

## **ROLE OF SECTORS**

Since the advent of the World Trade Organization, the Ministry of Agriculture has been intensifying its actions to ensure the safety of agricultural products, by monitoring all the factors involved in production on the farm, such as the control of water for irrigation, the application of pesticides, and other factors that could constitute a risk of the product being contaminated before it is processed for final consumption.

The Ministry of Agriculture monitors the factors that affect the safety of a product from the farm to the primary distributor. The Ministry of health is responsible for the control of products that require more processing once they have passed into the hands of the processor or primary distributor. If there is insufficient coordination among institutions, there will be segments of the food chain that are not monitored.

The aim is to cooperate with the industries involved in the safety processes required, from the farm to the table

From that point on, responsibility for the safety of processed foods until they reach the consumer lies with the health sector.

This task calls for very active and multi-sectoral participation.

## **ROLES AND FUNCTIONS OF MINISTRY OF HEALTH**

The goal of the Ministry of Health is to reduce the exposure of residents and visitors of Antigua and Barbuda to conditions that contribute to the incidence of food and water-borne diseases. The role and function of the Central Board of Health (and the Medical Division) is to ensure that safe food is provided to citizens and visitors to ensure protection of public health and to prevent food-borne illnesses.

Specific roles and functions include:

- Epidemiological Surveillance
- Monitoring of food service establishment, food service
- Workers= health, knowledge and practices
- Surveillance of foods
- Assessment and Surveillance of physical activities and
- Monitoring of food operations
- Education of the General Public
- Training of Personnel
- Inspection Services
- Regulatory and Enforcement
- Advice to food service establishment on standards/legislations/regulations
- Training programmes on food safety for producers, Consumers, food service personnel and the general public
- Advisory services for developing/organizing consumer protection groups
- Consultation/coordination with other agencies
- Promote the formulation of national policies and directives
- Management of Central abattoir, meat market and fish market

## **ROLES AND FUNCTIONS OF THE AGRICULTURAL SECTORS**

### **Fisheries Division**

The Fisheries Division is responsible for setting the conditions under which fishery products are processed, which includes sanitary and hygiene requirements for fish processing establishments. It

- Issues the health certificate accompanying consignments forwarded to the European Union
- Performs island-wide inspections of fish processing establishments
- Assists producers to implement their own checks by preparing a standard procedural manual for use by these establishments
- Provides Workshops on HACCP/own-check and Quality Control

### **Veterinary Authority**

The Veterinary Authority has responsibility for the control of zoonotic diseases, and food safety. The functions of the Veterinary and Livestock Division include:

- Meat inspection at the Central Abattoir
- Meat inspection of imported meats
- Slaughter Surveillance programme for bovine tuberculosis
- Responsibility for the enforcement of import regulations to minimize the introduction of exotic diseases

- Health Certification of animals and animal products for export

### **The Plant Protection Unit**

The Plant Protection Unit provides plant health services. The functions of the unit include:

- Inspection of containers holding fresh produce to ensure disease-free produce entering the country;
- Provides quarantine services including issuance of phyto-sanitary certificates to accompany inspected plant produce for export;
- Issuance of import permits for entry of plant produce and planting materials;
- Internal survey and detection programmes for pests and diseases;
- In association with Agricultural Extension Division, provides plant health advice to farmers.

### **Antigua and Barbuda Bureau of Standards**

The Antigua and Barbuda Bureau of Standards is a statutory body established under the Standards Act (Cap 411) to promote and encourage the maintenance of mandatory and voluntary standards. Its mandate includes the preparation of relevant food standards and assisting the food control authority with implementation and enforcement of these standards. It harmonizes its national food standards with Codex Alimentarius' international food standards.

The Bureau liaises with international and regional organizations thereby assisting our government to fulfill its mandates as signatories to various regional and international trade agreements. The Bureau is inter alia:

- A Council member of the Caricom Regional Organization for Standards and Quality - **CROSQ**
- The **National Codex Contact Point (NCCP)** – manages a collection of Codex Standards and other FAO and WHO publications; Manages Codex activities and disseminates codex information at the national level.
- The **National Enquiry Point (NEP)** for both the **WTO TBT and SPS** Agreements.

The Bureau is represented on the National Food Safety Committee and is involved in Public Education on Food Safety.

### **RESOURCES IN ANTIGUA AND BARBUDA**

1. Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory
  - has not been operational since 1990
  - inability to conduct basic diagnostic tests,
  - thus severely limiting diagnosis and surveillance
2. Animal Quarantine Station
  - does not exist

3. Abattoir Facilities

- A new abattoir has been constructed, but there are problems with the design. It still needs upgrading. Trace-back is also a problem.

4. Government Chemist's Laboratory

- Can only perform minimal testing due to the unavailability of resources.
- Food tests are limited to basic microbiological testing, including shelf-life, and the presence and level of molds.
- Not equipped to undertake testing for additives, antibiotics, hormones and toxins of fish and shellfish.
- Able to test for heavy metals such as mercury and lead, and undertake preliminary extractions for pesticide residue analysis.
- Responsible for food and water analysis (routine tests for faecal coliforms, total coliforms, and total aerobic count).
- does limited testing of food.

5. Public Health Laboratory at Holberton Hospital

- Tests clinical specimen (e.g. faeces) for Salmonella and Shigella species, and for ova/cysts/parasites
- No capacity to detect E. coli O157: H7, Campylobacter species, Hepatitis A, or protozoa (like Cryptosporidia, Cyclospora, Microspora sp.) Listeria.

**CONCLUSION:**

This document attempts to set forth the history and shortcomings of the food safety programme in Antigua and Barbuda. It also proposes solutions to the existing problems.