



PAN AMERICAN HEALTH ORGANIZATION
WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION



XI INTER-AMERICAN MEETING, AT THE MINISTERIAL LEVEL, ON ANIMAL HEALTH

Washington, D.C., 13–15 April 1999

Provisional Agenda Item 10.2

RIMSA11/18 (Eng.)
9 April 1999
ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

**PANEL: THE IMPACT OF FOODBORNE DISEASES ON PUBLIC HEALTH
AND TRADE**

**COMPREHENSIVE INTERCOUNTRY FOOD SURVEILLANCE.
A GUARANTEE OF QUALITY AND HYGIENE FOR IMPORTS**

by

Dr. Catherine E. Woteki
Under Secretary for Food Safety,
Department of Agriculture, United States of America

CONTENTS

	Page
<i>The Need for an International Food Safety System</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Essential Components.....</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>A Strong National Food Safety System</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>International Food Safety Systems.....</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>Communications</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>Closing.....</i>	<i>8</i>

It is a pleasure to be here today to address the topic of a “comprehensive intercountry food surveillance” system. In preparing my remarks, my first step was to determine whether a definition for this term already exists. Because my search was fruitless, I will take the liberty today of describing what I believe are the essential components of an international system for ensuring the safety of the food supply.

I will do so, however, with full recognition that the development of an international food safety system is evolutionary. This should come as no surprise to policy makers such as yourselves who know that what *should* be done, and what *can* be done, are usually two different things.

I believe it is important to build a structure based on a few essential components, and then as new technologies and resources become available, we can build on, and refine the system. This is the approach we are taking in the United States, and it is an approach I believe will work internationally as well.

The Need for an International Food Safety System

Before I discuss these essential components of an international food safety system, I would like to begin by discussing the importance of working on an international basis to improve food safety. While food safety has always been an important issue, much of our attention in the past has been focused on the diseases of food animals and the elimination from the human food supply of sick animals whose meat could transmit diseases to people, or that is deemed to be unwholesome. While we have made great strides in producing healthier animals worldwide, and this trend should continue, in the United States we have broadened our focus to minimizing other risks associated with meat and poultry products. In particular, we are focusing on risks associated with microorganisms pathogenic to humans, but not necessarily causing visible disease in carrier animals. Examples include *Salmonella*, *Campylobacter*, and *E. coli* O157:H7.

Many factors have led us to focus on preventing foodborne illnesses. First is the growing knowledge about the burden that foodborne illness places on society. In the United States, it is estimated that 6 to 33 million Americans become ill each year, and that foodborne illness contributes to the deaths of perhaps 9,000 persons each year. The economic impact of foodborne illness, in terms of medical care, lost wages, and associated costs, is \$5.6 to \$9.4 billion per year.

And we must remember that foodborne illness is not just a minor digestive upset. It can result in very serious, life-threatening health problems such as Guillain-Barré Syndrome, which is a paralysis associated with *Campylobacter*, and Hemolytic Uremic

Syndrome—life-threatening kidney damage associated with *E. coli* O157:H7. And because a large percentage of foodborne illnesses are preventable, we have an obligation to do more. We also know that new pathogens are emerging, and we must be prepared to address these emerging hazards. Examples are *E. coli* O157:H7 and *Campylobacter*.

We know that certain segments of the population are more susceptible to foodborne diseases, and that these segments are growing. Countries may have different patterns of population growth, but we all have individuals who are at higher risk of foodborne illness, such as infants and children, the elderly, pregnant women, and individuals who are immune-compromised.

Another factor affecting foodborne illness is concentration in the meat and poultry industries, which is occurring worldwide. This concentration, combined with increasing global trade, means that food products are being distributed far greater distances than ever before, thus creating opportunities for larger outbreaks of foodborne illness.

While improving the public health is the number one reason for establishing international systems to address food safety, other reasons exist as well. They include protecting national markets, protecting plant and animal health, and protecting against terrorism.

Essential Components

Assuming we agree that food safety requires attention at the international level, what, exactly, are the essential components of a comprehensive, international food safety surveillance system? That is the question that the organizers of this session asked me to address. I would like to describe these briefly and then go into more detail.

The first essential component of an international food safety surveillance system is the presence of *strong food safety systems within individual countries*. In a few moments, I will describe what I believe are the characteristics of a strong, national food safety system. Of course, these systems will look different based on the specific needs and resources of each individual country, but I believe there are some common characteristics that apply to us all.

Second, we need to establish *international food safety standards* as a means of ensuring a consistent level of public health protection worldwide and protecting national markets. Consumers need to know that the food they eat is safe regardless of whether it is produced domestically or imported.

Along with international food safety standards, we need a mechanism in place to *ensure “equivalency”* between trading partners in terms of food safety measures and regulations.

And finally, a system must be in place for *resolving trade disputes*. This is necessary to protect the public health as well as to ensure fair trade.

A Strong National Food Safety System

The first step, and the essential prerequisite, in developing a strong *international* food safety surveillance system is to develop strong *national* food safety systems. Today, I would like to talk about what we are doing in the United States to strengthen our domestic food safety programs and how surveillance undergirds our programs. Because the U.S. Department of Agriculture is responsible for the safety of meat, poultry, and processed egg products, I will focus my remarks on these specific products. USDA works closely with the Food and Drug Administration, which is responsible for the safety of all other foods, to coordinate food safety activities, and many of the points I will make apply to all foods.

First, a national food safety system must have adequate *legal authority* to establish a food safety system, to survey the marketplace, to prevent adulterated products from reaching consumers, and to act aggressively to protect consumers when foodborne outbreaks occur. The U.S. Department of Agriculture has the statutory responsibility to ensure that no meat or poultry that may be adulterated receives the mark of inspection and enters the marketplace, and companies slaughtering or processing meat and poultry have a legal obligation to report such activity to us. Because of our strong inspection laws, the United States requires imported meat and poultry products to meet high food safety standards equivalent to those that exist for domestically produced products. We believe such a system is necessary to assure consumers that imported meat and poultry products are as safe as those produced domestically.

In addition to strong legal authority, a national system of inspection should *effectively address the food safety hazards that are likely to occur* in products produced by that country. In the United States, several years ago we began a strategy for change that has as its centerpiece the Pathogen Reduction and Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP) rule. The requirements of that rule are now being implemented in U.S. meat and poultry plants, and implementation will be complete in January 2000.

The strengths of the HACCP-based food regulatory system are many. First, it requires industry to put in place HACCP—a process control system designed to prevent

food safety hazards from occurring. This is significant because it establishes the concept that industry is responsible for producing safe products and that it is preferable to prevent food safety hazards rather than address them after the fact. Second, it establishes food safety performance standards that describe the minimum requirements that HACCP systems must achieve. We believe that performance standards are a powerful tool for bringing out improvements in food safety. And third, the HACCP-based regulatory system establishes the government's role as setting performance standards and verifying that industry is meeting its food safety responsibilities.

A national food safety system also must have *adequate resources* to carry out its food safety responsibilities. It is not enough to set requirements for industry and then expect them to be met. A strong inspection presence is important to the overall success of any food safety system. We believe this strong inspection presence is one reason why HACCP implementation for meat and poultry has been so successful in the United States and has been supported by a wide range of constituents, including consumer groups.

A strong national food safety system also must be able to detect and rapidly *respond to foodborne disease outbreaks* and other food safety problems. In the United States, public health officials at the federal and local levels work closely together to respond to food emergencies such outbreaks of foodborne illness and chemical contamination of food. This close cooperation has helped our ability to quickly respond to emergencies and to coordinate the work of local, state, and federal agencies during the different phases of response: detection, investigation, regulatory response, and compliance verification. We also have made a lot of progress in our ability to identify outbreaks and link them to specific products, largely due to PulseNet—a growing database of molecular fingerprints of foodborne pathogens. This technology is extremely important because it helps to link what were previously considered sporadic cases of foodborne illness, and we have used it for this purpose many times since its inception in 1995. We need information systems such as PulseNet, which I just described, and FoodNet—our nationwide surveillance system for foodborne diseases—to give us information that can be used to develop science-based food safety policies.

PulseNet points to the importance of new technology in strengthening national food safety surveillance systems and the importance of *research investments* to develop such technology. Surveillance systems need reliable and rapid methods of detecting foodborne pathogens. We need cost-effective interventions that can be used during the production of meat and poultry products to reduce or eliminate pathogens. And we need risk assessments as a means of determining the hazards associated with specific foods and specific pathogens.

To summarize, strong legal authority, a HACCP-based regulatory system, adequate resources, the ability to detect and respond to outbreaks of foodborne illness, and research and development—these, I believe, are the characteristics of a strong, national food safety system, and this is the direction we are taking in the United States.

International Food Safety Systems

But strong national systems, while prerequisites, are only part of the equation in a world that is so dependent on food moving in international trade. Let's assume that all countries have strong national systems such as I've just described. What else would be needed to have a comprehensive intercountry surveillance system?

I would like to submit that we would need a mechanism for developing international food safety standards, a mechanism for determine the equivalence of measures used by individual countries to meet food safety standards, and a mechanism for resolving trade disputes. In this area there is good news, because all three of these exist.

First, as you well know, the Codex Alimentarius Commission exists as a mechanism for developing international food safety standards. The work of Codex has always been important, but its value has increased substantially for many reasons—the most important being its relatively new status in the World Trade Organization. The increasing importance of Codex provides an added incentive to ensure that Codex maintains its credibility as an objective, science-based international food standard-setting organization. Thus for the future, we must continue to strengthen the scientific basis behind the formulation of standards. There will always be temptation for national political and consumer preferences to unduly influence what should be scientific decisions. That would be a grave mistake—particularly at the international level. We also must support the incorporation of harmonized risk assessment procedures into the standard-setting process to the extent possible. And we must encourage public involvement in Codex, both nationally and internationally, to broaden our perspective and ensure that we are responsive to public concerns. Activities in all of these areas are ongoing, and we must continue our progress to ensure that Codex deserves the status it has been accorded.

We must also have a system in place for determining the equivalence of food safety measures and regulations between countries. This is important to protect the public health as well as to facilitate trade. A discussion is now underway through the Codex Alimentarius Commission's Committee on Food Import and Export Inspection and Certification Systems. Its goal is to have international guidelines on determining equivalence in place in order to better protect the public health and facilitate trade.

Regarding dispute resolution, the World Trade Organization is in place to oversee the rules of international trade, and we believe it plays a necessary role in ensuring fair trade. For the future, we would like to see more transparency in the WTO process so that the public can be better informed.

Communications

If strong national programs were in place in addition to international standards and systems of determining equivalence and resolving trade disputes, what else would be needed for comprehensive intercountry surveillance? I think we would need regular channels of communication at the technical, administrative, and policy levels.

Closing

In closing, I think we have many opportunities to work together to strengthen our national food safety systems, and the United States is committed to helping other countries that are interested in pursuing equivalent programs. In fact, we are now discussing with PAHO the possibility of organizing a workshop for English-speaking countries in the Caribbean on how we carry out HACCP, establishing national Codex programs, and understanding WTO. In addition, we offer a course through our training center for inspection personnel at Texas A&M University for foreign government officials on U.S. inspection requirements.

We also have many opportunities to make further progress, through Codex, in setting international food safety standards and developing principles for determining equivalence. The United States is committed to helping other countries better participate in Codex and better understand their rights and obligations under the WTO.

Beyond these steps, however, I believe there is more we can do to further the goal of establishing an international system of food safety. For example, I know efforts are underway to establish laboratory network systems for the Americas so that laboratory results can be relied upon and shared. I believe this is an important step that will bring us closer toward the goal of establishing international foodborne disease surveillance systems as a means of tracking emerging trends worldwide. We are not there yet, but this is where we should be headed.

I look forward to working with you on these many challenges now and in the future.

