

ENSURING FOOD SAFETY

Section 15.1 of 2010 Report refers

COMMENT

Achieving and maintaining the highest possible standards of food safety must be a top priority for any food producing country today. For a country such as Ireland, where the food sector is so important to the economy, the achievement of the highest food safety standards, and the ability to demonstrate this, has an added importance. As underlined in the AF2010 report, responsibility for food safety begins with the primary producer and continues throughout the industry chain to the final retail transaction.

All concerned with the food sector in Ireland should seek to be to the forefront in relation to food safety and consumer protection, and to be regarded as a model for other countries. The reality is that we cannot afford to take chances with a second best approach. Being in a position where our food safety status and reputation is recognised abroad offers considerable advantage in our ability to trade in markets throughout the world.

Responsibility for enforcing food safety legislation in the Republic of Ireland is vested in the Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI). The regulatory services provided by various Government Departments and Agencies are, since 1999, provided under service contract to the FSAI. This arrangement is working very well in practice.

The Food Safety Promotion Board (FSPB) was established in December 1999 as the all-island body with responsibility for the promotion of food safety knowledge and awareness together with risk assessment, research and surveillance. The FSPB and the FSAI will work in partnership to ensure that best practice is implemented along the food safety continuum.

ACTIONS

The following actions will be taken by the **Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI)** and the **Food Safety Promotion Board (FSPB)**:

- The enforcement and inspection role of the FSAI, working with the various regulatory agents carrying out food safety regulation work in Ireland under contract, ensures a seamless food safety regulation system throughout the food sector from primary production to final retail sale or export. The overall State service in relation to food safety will be kept under constant review by the FSPB and the FSAI to ensure that best practice, based on the most up to date information, risk assessment, analytical services and inspection procedures, is in place.
- The FSAI will co-ordinate all aspects of food safety training on an ongoing basis. It will develop appropriate training modules and provide relevant alternative educational material for all operatives in the food sector. A multi-agency forum to develop a national strategy for the development and delivery of food hygiene training to all sections of the food industry will be established. The FSAI will co-ordinate this in association with the various bodies and agencies involved.
- A comprehensive directory of laboratory services (north and south) will be set up by end of September 2000 by the FSPB.
- The FSPB will promote discussions on the development of comprehensive food safety strategies for the island of Ireland.
- Comprehensive surveillance data on appropriate food safety indicators are already being published by both DAFRD and Teagasc. This information will be collated and incorporated in data to be published by the FSPB.

The following actions will be taken by **DAFRD**:

- Food quality and food safety are not one and the same thing. All food must be safe for consumers to eat, irrespective of where it comes within the quality spectrum or the price range. Quality assurance schemes must, however, include guarantees of food safety as a basic element. The Food Quality Assurance Schemes Review Group under DAFRD will report in Autumn 2000 on how to ensure greater coherence and clarity, and attention to food safety, under quality assurance schemes.
- The application of targeted and random inspection and sampling of animals for residues of substances which render products unfit as food will continue to be undertaken by DAFRD in association with other agencies. Where necessary, action will be taken to protect consumers and penalise infringement of legislation.
- DAFRD will ensure full compliance with the relevant legislative provisions under its remit in the various livestock sectors in order to provide the maximum food safety guarantees to consumers in Ireland and world-wide.
- Measures relating to the protection of consumers from any potential risk from BSE will be rigorously enforced by DAFRD through the strict application of the rules relating to the removal and destruction of specified risk materials (SRM) from cattle and sheep carcasses.
- DAFRD will also continue to rigorously apply its clean cattle policy, aimed at reducing the risk of transmitting E-Coli from the live animal to the carcass at slaughter. The Carcass Hygiene Evaluation Programme, introduced by DAFRD in 1999 in all beef slaughter plants, also has as its purpose the elimination of cross contamination during carcass dressing. These measures will add significantly to the safety of meat.
- The Beef Quality Assurance Scheme, together with the regulatory provisions relating to cattle production and beef processing and the traceability offered by CMMS, provides a basis for guaranteeing the safety of Irish beef. The measures involved will be vigorously applied and promoted as a necessary element within Ireland's cattle and beef sector.
- A formal micro-biological sampling programme will be introduced in September 2000 under the 'own checks programmes' in slaughter and cutting plants. This programme will complement existing programmes in relation to the micro-biological safety of meat.
- A national scheme for fallen animal collection and disposal will be put in place in 2000 by DAFRD. While this has relevance to the protection of the environment and animal health, it is also important from a food safety point of view.
- In relation to milk and dairy products, Directive 92/46 provides a solid basis for guaranteeing the safety of milk products originating in Ireland. DAFRD will ensure that the Directive is fully implemented at all levels in the industry.
- In the pig sector, DAFRD will place the already operating Salmonella Control Programme on a statutory basis by December 2000.
- DAFRD will continue to protect the high standards associated with the poultry sector, in particular in relation to salmonella, through the detection and, where appropriate, elimination of affected flocks.

The laboratory services of DAFRD, currently based in Abbotstown, will move to a new site. The Department will use the opportunity of the move to upgrade the services it provides and to equip itself with state of the art facilities. The development of a new laboratory complex will involve consultation with other agencies involved in the provision of food safety, including FSAI and the Department of Health and Children.

Contingency plans are being developed and reviewed in relation to animal health and food safety emergencies.

A number of other agencies will also be involved in actions to promote food safety:

Promotion and marketing of Irish food by Bord Bia and Bord Glas will make full use of the food safety guarantees which can be provided to consumers as a result of the food safety control systems in place in Ireland.

The National Disease Surveillance Council (NDSC) is currently developing a human food borne surveillance system. Because of the complexity of the task, this will be finalised in early 2002. DAFRD currently operates a reporting system under the EU Zoonosis Directive.

Training programmes for the safe production of food by farms have been developed by Teagasc and will be widely disseminated.

Developments at EU level in relation to food safety will include:

The Government support the establishment of a new European Food Authority proposed in the Commission White Paper on Food Safety, which is currently under discussion. It is essential that lessons learnt in the past, in relation to food safety and the handling at EU level of risk assessment, are put to good use. The Government supports the position that all available information in relation to food safety, and the basis on which risk assessment and risk management decisions are taken, be made available to consumers in an intelligible and transparent manner.

A range of proposals are currently under examination at EU level to identify possible weaknesses, and to introduce improved controls where necessary, in the manufacture of compound feedingstuffs. These provide for tighter controls on the labelling and use of feed materials and additional powers to take rapid action to ban imports from third countries when a risk is detected.

Labelling of food, and the provision of the fullest possible information, is increasingly important in order to ensure that consumers have the maximum choice when purchasing or consuming food. EU and national labelling legislation has been revised and updated in recent years. The requirements on labelling of food will be updated regularly to ensure that the provisions remain appropriate to developments in food production, processing and marketing.

In the beef sector specifically, new EU regulations for compulsory labelling have recently been agreed at EU level and will be introduced in two stages. From 1 September 2000 labels on packs will include data on the animal or group of animals from which beef is derived; approval number and country of the slaughterhouse and deboning hall; and category of animal. From 1 Jan 2002, information on the country where the animals were born or reared will be included.

ASSURING FOOD QUALITY

Section 15.2 of 2010 Report refers

COMMENT

When the core value of food safety is guaranteed, quality becomes the main standard which determines the ultimate value of food and the price at which it can be sold to consumers. Quality can be a very subjective concept with many possible interpretations. In general, quality can be characterised by a set of features that enhance the product in terms of excellence, e.g. taste, appearance, nutritional value, fat level and colour.

As the markets for Irish food develop and are consolidated, both at home and abroad, quality of product assumes greater significance. Our food producers will have to measure up to the existing quality standards of the consumer world-wide. Concern for quality must feature at every link in the food chain. To this end a large number of measures dealing with food quality are in existence. These quality improvement measures operate at two interconnecting and continuously developing levels – obligatory (those with a legal basis) and private market-driven schemes.

At the obligatory level, a framework for the delivery of quality is rooted in specifications for breeding, production and packaging, based on national and EU legal requirements. These measures cover the commodity spectrum from cattle production to fruit and vegetables.

A relatively recent development in quality improvement has been the emergence of retail customer-focused schemes. This trend is indicative both of the competitive nature of today's retail sector and of the demand from consumers for a specific quality focus. These schemes are in the ownership of the individual retail bodies. While producers must respond to the various customer demands made on them, in many cases these demands focus on divergent aspects of quality. While the evolution of such schemes is welcome, there is a need for some co-ordination of these schemes and development of their relationships with the statutory based schemes. Accordingly, a Food Quality Assurance Schemes Review Group has been established, and their report is expected by the end of 2000.

DAFRD welcomes the detailed consideration given in the Agri Food 2010 Report to quality in the beef sector. The grades of Irish cattle, as measured against the EUROP grid, need to be improved. It is regretted that some reports and public statements on this issue have been misinterpreted as indicating a decline in the eating quality and flavour of Irish beef. In fact, the decline in standards referred to in these reports relates to the classification of Irish beef carcasses in terms of fatness and conformation as determined by the EUROP grid. Similarly there is considerable room for improvement in the grading standards of sheep.

DAFRD has already sought to address these issues, particularly through the carcass classification scheme and the establishment of the Irish Cattle Breeding Federation (ICBF). The Department has used the discretion available to it under the direct payments systems to target funds at quality beef heifers. The Department will continue to follow this approach. Both the Report of the Beef Task Force and the Sheep Forum Report included recommendations relating to improvement in standards. The majority of these recommendations are addressed to the industry itself.

ACTIONS

The following action plan will be implemented on quality:

- The Food Quality Assurance Schemes Review Group will review the operation of quality measures with a view to achieving greater coherence and transparency in quality. The Group will report in Autumn 2000.
- Monitoring Committees under independent chairpersons have been established to oversee the implementation of the recommendations of the Beef Task Force and the Sheep Forum, and considerable progress has already been made.

Specifically in relation to the quality of beef, the following actions will be taken:

DAFRD

- DAFRD will progress the introduction of more effective graded pricing systems for cattle. The introduction of such a system will be a condition of grant aid under the National Development Plan.
- The publication of cattle prices paid by individual meat plants on a weekly basis has introduced a greater degree of transparency into the system. It will give clear information to producers about the level of prices available for high quality cattle.
- DAFRD, in conjunction with Teagasc, has organised, funded and managed a major trial on beef carcass mechanical classification in order to facilitate the introduction of an objective classification system, which would remove one of the obstacles to graded pricing. The trial showed that mechanical classification had potential but needs to be improved if it is to meet with the standards proposed by the European Commission for the approval of such machines. Further trials will be undertaken to attempt to secure the necessary improvement.
- DAFRD is actively examining the provisions of the Animal Remedies Regulations in relation to the control of fertility synchronisation products, which can be used to good effect in AI in beef herds by part time farmers in particular. This review will be completed by Autumn 2000.

Teagasc

- Teagasc has recently undertaken a series of demonstrations around the country to promote better breeding. It will use focused programmes to actively promote the production of quality beef using efficient breeding, feeding and related farm management systems.
- Teagasc in its advice to farmers will pay greater attention to the fact that the number of part-time beef producers is increasing. It will encourage such farmers to optimise premia and support payments, avail of extensification and possibly join REPS. Research at Grange Research Centre is addressing beef production systems in the context of these production constraints. The results of this research will be widely disseminated.

Bord Bia

- A comprehensive market research programme is a key element of Bord Bia's market development and promotional strategy for European markets. Bord Bia will extend its research on consumer attitudes to Irish beef to guide and evaluate its activities in potential new markets.

- The results of the extended Bord Bia market research will be used in presentations to potential buyers of Irish beef and will be integrated with Teagasc's research on quality production systems in information for producers and processors.

ICBF

- The formal establishment of the Irish Cattle Breeding Federation with the direct involvement of all sections of the cattle industry represents a unique opportunity to improve cattle breeding standards across the country.
- ICBF will establish and operate a cattle breeding database to assist and support the animal performance recording and testing activities of its member organisations.
- ICBF will calculate and publish genetic evaluations for all potential breeding animals, which will facilitate cumulative and sustainable genetic improvement of the Irish national cattle herd.
- ICBF will stimulate and co-ordinate the evaluation, development and use of technologies, systems, processes and services which have the potential to increase the rate of genetic progress in the Irish national cattle herd.

Inter-Agency Co-operation

- The already very close co-operation between Teagasc, the ICBF and DAFRD in the development of breed improvement programmes and the dissemination of information to farmers on cattle breeding, particularly on the use of top genetic bulls, will be strengthened.
- DAFRD and Bord Bia will intensify their efforts to ensure that the consumer is correctly informed on the quality aspects of Irish beef. Bord Bia will continue to promote the high eating quality of Irish beef.