



FOOD focus

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MAF REG

Change seems to be the flavour of the month, with this the first edition of Food Focus since the merger of the Ministry of Agriculture with Forestry. As well, the Regulatory Authority has changed its shorthand title from MAF RA to MAF Reg to aid understanding of the role we play in the new Ministry. MAF Reg has been busy. Major changes are underway to the Meat Act (story below), and inside are update reports on standards issues and market access for salmon, potatoes, poultry and cherries, amongst others. We hope you find it a useful read.

MAF
Regulatory Authority; Information
for the Agriculture and Seafood Industries



Old Meat Act on the Slaughter Board

A major overhaul of New Zealand's outdated meat legislation is under way and a new Meat Act is scheduled to be passed by November 1998.

MAF Reg's Chief Meat Veterinary Officer Tony Zohrab says the existing Act (passed in 1981) is obsolete, prescriptive and isn't flexible enough to cope with emerging food risks or make the most of new safety methodologies such as Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point (HACCP).

"In addition, it is constraining innovation and competitiveness, whereas the new Act will encourage entrepreneurial activity in the sector," Dr Zohrab says.

"Simply, if New Zealand is to improve its protection of health and enable our industries to compete with countries that apply more efficient risk management systems, then the fundamentals of the regulatory regime for meat need to be re-written," he says.

Key principles of the new Act include:

- Animal material will be processed under a risk management system so that products are "fit for purpose."
- The responsibilities, and obligations of parties with a role in achieving the purpose of the Act will be defined. Cabinet has already agreed to an "optimal regulatory model" with three levels: . . .

- A **regulatory function** (standard setting, compliance, certification, enforcement and approvals) which will remain a core Government function;
- **Verifiers**, who are independent of the regulated industry, confirm the required standards have been met and authorise certification on that basis. This function will be contestable where market access conditions permit.
- **The regulated industry**, which will carry out production in accordance with a risk management programme designed by the processor and unique to their particular situation and risks. The programme will incorporate standards, performance targets and any additional importing country requirements.
 - The new Act will be aligned with other New Zealand food legislation.
 - It will be enabling and not prescriptive. Much of the necessary detail regarding the technical mechanics of the Act will be written into Regulations and tertiary legislation to provide flexibility for a dynamic environment. Devolution of inspection services, contestability of verification tasks, adoption of consistent and appropriate cost recovery regimes within Government and harmonisation of New Zealand standards under the

Meat Act and Food Act will also be provided for. The Act will also allow a flexible approach for the new "value added" and "niche" products the industries are now developing. "The new Act is designed for the present and future with opportunities for significant economic gains for our vital meat, game and seafood industries," says Dr Zohrab.

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Quality Quote "When eating bamboo shoots, remember the people who planted them."

Chinese Proverb

Salmon to leap the Tasman?

New Zealand access to the potentially lucrative Australian fresh salmon market has moved a step closer as a result of a recent visit by Dr Peter Durham of Australian Quarantine Inspection Service (AQIS). Hosted by MAF Reg, Dr Durham was inspecting facilities and gathering data as part of the assessment process for New Zealand's three year old application to access the market. Chief Veterinary Officer Barry O'Neil said New Zealand producers were particularly keen to access the market because of its closeness and because the only other major export market currently available was Japan. There is no word as yet for a confirmed decision date from the Australians.

Animal standards agreed with China

Approval is expected at any moment for the export of a range of New Zealand animals and animal genetic material to China. This follows the agreement of access protocols for live cattle, sheep and goats and bovine semen and embryos. A draft agreement was also made for sheep and goat embryos and for slaughter cattle. The protocols were agreed on a visit by MAF Chief Veterinary Officer Barry O'Neil and Noel Murray, (National Manager, International Animal Trade), to China in meetings with officers of the Chinese Animals and Plant Quarantine Service (CAPO). While in China, Dr O'Neil observed a greater willingness of the Chinese to accept the technical standards for animals and animal products of the Office International des Epizooties, the international animal health organisation. Dr O'Neil welcomed this good news for New Zealand.

Policy Watch

Working Party tackles Food Administration.

MAF and the Ministry of Health are working on a review which aims to move food safety into the "modern era."

A working party has been formed to review the administration of food and food safety as covered by the Meat Act, Food Act and the Dairy Industry Act.

Deputy General of Agriculture, Peter O'Hara said the review would develop a framework for strategic decisions about issues such as;

- removing duplicate regulations and regulatory systems
- replacing the existing supervisory model of food safety with more efficient systems such as HACCP (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point)
- clarifying the roles of environmental health officers employed by territorial local authorities and health protection officers employed by CHEs.

The Dairy Regulations 1990 and the Food Act Amendment No. 2 are models of the new direction. The Working Party will report to the Ministers of affected Departments in April before release of a discussion paper and a round of public consultation scheduled for July to September.



New Standards Council for Poultry

The new Poultry Industry Standards Council (PISC) has been established after two years as an informal body.

The Council has similar terms of reference to the fish, meat and venison industry standards councils, which have proved their worth as fora for industry development and promotion of industry-wide "buy in" to standards.

Tracey Grose, MAF Reg's National Advisor (Food Safety) says the new Council's structure will enable the poultry industry to have a stronger stake in the development of standards. Chief Executives from the poultry processors are represented on the Council, as are the Poultry Industry Association (PIANZ), the Ministry of Health and MAF Reg (Meat and Seafood).

A milestone for PISC will be agreeing the Poultry Industry Processing Standard (PIPS 5) within the next few weeks. PIPS 5 includes standards for pre-harvest through to hygienic dressing and cooling regimes.



New Zealand's ability to export food competitively is strongly dependent on our biosecurity status as these plant and animal case studies suggest

plants

Stephen Ogden is MAF Reg's National Advisor for Export Phytosanitary Standards and Negotiations. He heads a small team assembling information on our trading partners' phytosanitary requirements - (the pests and diseases they don't want and the phytosanitary measures they apply to keep it that way), and ensuring, exporters and the MQM people inspecting our export produce, know these. Prime examples of unwanted pests are the fruit flies, and the Colorado Beetle. So far, these species have been prevented from establishing themselves in New Zealand giving us a competitive advantage over other Southern Hemisphere countries such as Australia and Chile who face increased surveillance and/or fumigation treatment costs because they have some species of fruit flies.

Codling up to the Koreans

If our forebears had been more careful with the introduction of Codling Moth a hundred years ago, New Zealand Cherry Growers could already be enjoying exclusive delivery of their fresh product to the Korean market. As it is, MAF Reg has spent the last three years developing a rapport with our equivalent, the Korean National Plant Quarantine Service making a case that New Zealand cherries are not a vector for Codling Moth. This effort has included three visits to Korea and hosting several Korean visitors here in New Zealand, as well as a host of technical document exchanges. This cautionary tale with the lesser-risk moth suggests the much larger problems that could occur if the Mediterranean fruit fly ever becomes established here.

Spuds Away!

Three years of hard work by MAF have been recognised by a "Derogation" issued for New Zealand Potatoes by the European Union. Far from being something derogatory, a derogation is actually a temporary exemption from a prohibition of import in order for the risks and impact to be monitored. Stephen Ogden admits there are still quite a lot of conditions attached but emphasises New Zealand growers and MAF can meet them. The trial lasts from 15th January to the end of April, and could be the breakthrough in creating a permanent window for our growers into the European potato market.

animals

"The Border is our defence"

Kevin Corrin is MAFReg's National Manager - Animal Quarantine. His staff administer the consultation process and assess proposals to introduce new species of animals (although it is expected that from 1 July 1998, this function will be transferred to ERMA NZ.) They also write the standards for transitional facilities (including quarantine facilities) that hold imported animals and animal products under certain conditions.

To keep up to date with the latest disease risks, Kevin says MAF collects a lot of intelligence through its membership of the O.I.E (Office Internationale des Epizooties), through our own disease surveillance systems and through information traded with associates internationally.

Under the Biosecurity Act any risk goods to be imported must have an import health standard or it will be intercepted.

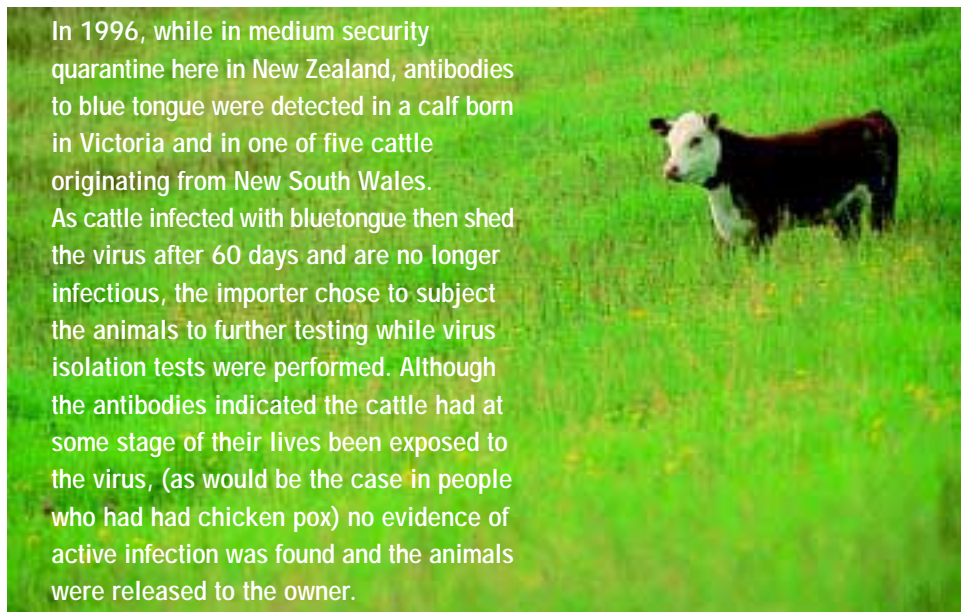
There are currently 74 quarantine facilities registered in New Zealand. Rather than being directly operated by the Government, they are commercially operated facilities which meet specified standards and face regular supervision from MAF Quality Management supervisors.

Case study - New Zealand has been importing live cattle from Australia for many years and has built up an intensive knowledge of the risk profile presented by them. Cattle sourced above latitude 26° are potentially exposed to bluetongue, so the import health standard specifies testing for this disease before they leave the area, and again when they are held in isolation in Victoria. They are then tested in New Zealand Quarantine.

In 1996, while in medium security quarantine here in New Zealand, antibodies to blue tongue were detected in a calf born in Victoria and in one of five cattle originating from New South Wales.

As cattle infected with bluetongue then shed the virus after 60 days and are no longer infectious, the importer chose to subject the animals to further testing while virus isolation tests were performed. Although the antibodies indicated the cattle had at some stage of their lives been exposed to the virus, (as would be the case in people who had had chicken pox) no evidence of active infection was found and the animals were released to the owner.

A case such as this rapidly assumes economic, political and emotional overtones says Kevin Corrin, but in every case MAF's responsibility is to exercise a sound technical assessment. Kevin and his team also used the event to hold a discussion with the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service over the effectiveness of the serological test they were using, to ensure the problem does not arise again.



Research Watch

U.S. to apply MegaReg to Sheep

The New Zealand meat industry which incorporates meat companies, regulatory bodies (such as MAF) and research organisations (such as MIRINZ), are world leaders in understanding the microbiology of meat as it relates to food safety and spoilage. Since 1972, the industry has had in place extensive microbiological monitoring programmes. The wealth of information provided has been used to optimise procedures to minimise the risk of food borne illness to consumers as well as maximise storage life. New Zealand, therefore, fully supported the principles of the US Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) Pathogen Reduction/HACCP Final Rule (MegaReg) when introduced in late 1995. The MegaReg focuses on pathogens and improvements in food safety, and has had a major influence in regulatory requirements for meat in international trade. It initially required exporters of beef to the US to implement HACCP, sanitation standard operating procedures, and a monitoring programme for *E. coli*, an indicator for contamination of carcasses by gut contents.

The FSIS now propose to extend the *E. coli* sampling and testing requirements to exporters of "minor species", which includes sheep.

In pursuing a scientifically-justified microbiological monitoring programme for sheep



meat exported to the US, MAF Reg has recently compiled a major submission to the US FSIS. Hopefully this submission will be taken into account in the continuing discussions on technical variations to the MegaReg under the World Trade Organisation (WTO) SPS agreement principles of equivalence. Such variations would continue to offer the highest level of assurance of food safety of our meat, but would be most scientifically justified

and cost-effective under New Zealand processing conditions.



Meet our People

Barry O'Neil Chief Veterinary Officer

As Chief Veterinary Officer, Barry O'Neil has been MAF Reg's man in the hot seat when it comes to issues like BSE, live sheep exports, transgenic sheep imports, Bengal Cats and the biggie of recent times, RCD. "Trouble seems to follow me around," says the Massey qualified vet whose role as CVO is to administer the Biosecurity Act in relation to Animal Health and Welfare. This includes administering standards for importing animals and animal products, borders and quarantine, exotic disease control and animal welfare. Barry's rural background from Palmerston North and Te Puke, his experience in private practise as a vet and forays into orcharding and international trade (as Veterinary Counsellor in Brussels), serve him well when the pressure is on. Away from work Barry's time is spent with his family of four children and wife Hilda in Wellington's sun-drenched suburb of Eastbourne.

TRUTHFULNESS IN BEEF LABELLING

new requirements

From the 1st of April 1998, the European Union will require all labels or claims for beef (such as "grass fed", "aged", "organic", "Aberdeen Angus" etc) to be approved by a "competent authority" which will take accountability for the truthfulness of labels. MAF Reg will have this accountability in New Zealand, but may appoint other agencies as verification agencies as appropriate and agreed with industry.

Bright Note

The changes detailed to the Meat Act on the front page are just one of a number of positive developments for the meat industry. We will profile more of these in a special edition of Food Focus to be published next month.

ABOUT FOOD FOCUS

MAF Reg Food Focus is issued four times a year by MAF Regulatory Authority. It provides an overview of issues impacting on the regulatory environment for the Meat and Seafood industries. People requiring specific information are invited to contact the Authority. Food Focus welcomes feedback and suggestions for future editions.

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