



FOOD focus

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MAF Reg

There's a lot happening at the moment. MAF's recent decision to permit limited imports of trout and salmon for human consumption has much to say about the role of risk analysis and commitment to the principles of free trade which New Zealand benefits from. Inside there are updates about breakthroughs to South America and a positive decision from the US regarding our food safety status. We also look at a few issues for the possum meat trade, and profile some strongly recommended changes to the way sheep are washed prior to slaughter. Overall, this issue reflects on increasing globalisation and the linkages between domestic and international issues for our food sector.

MAF Regulatory Authority; Information for the Agriculture and Seafood Industries



Sound reasons for salmon, trout import decision

Stuart Macdiarmid, National Manager for Agricultural Security at MAF Reg Animal Health and Welfare, explains the background to MAF's recent decision to allow limited imports of table trout and salmon.

Following a major risk analysis that took two years to complete and was reviewed by a number of international experts, MAF is to allow New Zealanders the right to import table trout and salmon from certain countries where fish processing and disease surveillance standards are equivalent to our own.

The allowable products include uncooked, headless, gilled and gutted salmon, trout and char from Australia, Canada, E.U. States, Norway and the USA. The fish must be for human consumption and commercial consignments must be accompanied by a health certificate from the relevant government authority of the exporting country.

Uncooked table salmon was imported into New Zealand until 1983, when commercial salmon farming was established and there was concern that trade in dead fish might somehow result in the introduction of diseases to New Zealand salmon, trout or native fish stocks.

However, New Zealand law and our international obligations require MAF to

restrict trade only in cases where a scientifically-based analysis is able to demonstrate a genuine disease risk from a trade. Two major risk analyses have, in fact, demonstrated just the opposite; the likelihood of introducing any fish disease through trade in table salmon or trout is extremely small. Even if New Zealand imported the entire annual production of wild salmon caught in British Columbia every year for 100 years we would be unlikely to introduce disease.

MAF's conclusion that there aren't any reasons linked to disease risk for continuing to exclude imported trout has been unpopular amongst some recreational fishers. A common concern is that the availability of imported trout will encourage the poaching of local trout. It is hard to know whether this fear is justified or not. However, the potential criminal behaviour of a tiny minority of New Zealanders is not a legitimate reason to deny access to our markets and there is a range of commercial and government documentation which can be used to verify the origin of imported trout. Imported trout is expected to be a high-cost product and restaurants and retailers selling such a product are unlikely to jeopardise their livelihood by buying illegal, home-caught product through the back door.

New Zealand is a major exporter of products produced from agriculture, aquaculture and fisheries. Science-based risk analysis and the fair trading rules promoted by our membership in the World Trade Organisation are our best means of securing and preserving access to the world's markets. However, trade is a two way affair and we cannot demand access to other countries' markets while continuing to exclude other countries' products on spurious grounds.

Inside

Equivalence breakthrough with U.S.

Compliance group gets busy.

The problems with possums.

Why swim-washing should go.

Quality Quote "In the field of observation, chance favours the prepared mind." Louis Pasteur

New Zealand safety programme recognised by U.S.

A major part of New Zealand's food safety programme has been granted 'equivalent' status under the United States MegaReg requirements. This means our exporters won't have to exactly copy the American food safety programmes, as long as we achieve similar outcomes. It's something the Government, MAF Regulatory Authority and Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade have been working towards for years as it means big savings in compliance costs. The decision came from the United States Food Safety Inspection Service, part of the United States Department of Agriculture. It recognises the equivalence of our National Microbiological Database in relation to the microbiological testing requirements of the US Pathogen Reduction Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point (HACCP), Final Rule. New Zealand will be required to make only one minor modification - to the size of product area to be sampled. A number of other countries are seeking, but have not yet received 'equivalency' status, so the decision is a considerable achievement for New Zealand, and seen as an important expression of international free trade principles in action.

South American agreements made

A number of market access gains have been made in South America this year. New Zealand now has market access for beef into Chile through an agreement signed during the year between MAF and the Agriculture and Animal Husbandry Service of the Republic of Chile (SAG). MAF is arranging training for certifiers to oversee the production of beef into Chile (including beef cuts, trimmings and offal). Negotiation of a protocol for lamb access into Chile is in the final stages of agreement.

MAF has an agreement in principle with SENASA (Argentina) and is waiting on official confirmation of acceptance of our MAF certificate, which will allow export of beef to Argentina. The protocol for lamb exports into Argentina is being finalised.

Protocols for beef exports to Uruguay have also been agreed and exports will commence as soon as a contract is settled between Uruguay importers and New Zealand exporters.

Health conditions for lamb, beef, fisheries and poultry products have been negotiated for access to Brazil and MAF Reg is in the process of finalising an overarching Agreement. This should be completed towards the end of 1998.

Policy Watch

Standards Council for Ostrich and Emu Processing

MAF Reg's philosophy of jointly developing standards with industry participants has resulted in the formation of the Ostrich and Emu Standards Council (OESC), so that the interests and views of this emerging sector can be heard.

The Council has representatives from the Ostrich and Emu Farmers Association, the post farm gate sector (processors and marketing,) MAF Reg and Ministry of Health. It is chaired by Ross Davies from Massey University's Faculty of Technology.

The Council's first task is to develop an industry processing standard, which is nearly complete. The Council has requested that the standard be adopted in MAF-licensed premises which process ostrich and emu, and for an interim period in premises registered under the Food Hygiene Regulations where the bulk of slaughter and processing currently occurs. After the passing of the new Meat Act, the slaughter and processing of all ostrich and emus will be under MAF's control.

Industry representatives on the Council expect that having a robust industry standard will provide the greatest protection for the consumer, and assist in the positioning of ostrich and emu meat as a premier food item.



Checking on the checkers; busy times for the Compliance Group

MAF Compliance Group provides the assurances that the Government's meat and seafood safety, biosecurity and animal welfare standards are being upheld. It's an expert team of ten assessors led by National Manager Geoff Allen. Half of the team are veterinarians, while the others have held senior meat inspection, border protection and animal welfare roles. The Group's main role is auditing the performance of the recently created verification agencies which in turn supervise and control the meat and seafood hygiene standards of individual export processors.

A growing role of the group is demonstrating and convincing the many overseas visitors and commissions that the 'New Zealand way' of validating and verifying their standards is equivalent to their own. This insulates individual processors in New Zealand from the unpredictability and stress of on-site inspections by these groups. Geoff Allen says it's a "systems-based approach, which makes the process of gaining access to export markets far more manageable for the processors".

In this year's audit schedule (recently commenced), the performance of HACCP processes in meat and seafood is squarely in the sights of the Group. HACCP has been operating in fish and large meat premises since last year, and is currently being introduced by remaining meat premises in response to worldwide demands for safer food. The performance of New Zealand's quarantine facilities and its zoos are also receiving close scrutiny this year.



What's up with possums on the menu?

If you have ever tried to take a possum alive, you will have glimpsed one reason there is unlikely to be an immediate boom in international trade of the New Zealand possum for food.

Most of the countries accepting our possums as food require the possums to be held alive for inspection for 28 days prior to slaughter. This, and the need to source possums from Tb free areas is proving a deterrent to New Zealand suppliers moving into the market.

Steady effort by MAF Reg over the last few years has resulted in market access for possum meat for human consumption to Hong Kong, Taiwan and Japan. Access conditions are based on the New Zealand Standard. In line with other game animals, there are stringent procurement requirements for live possums to manage and minimise risks associated with collecting feral animals.

In all cases possums must be trapped live from Tb free areas, and from areas where specified poisons such as 1080 have not been used for defined periods. Ante and postmortem inspections are carried out by MAF Verification Agency staff and there are some special requirements for premises. A full specification can be obtained from the MAF Verification Agency.

MAF official export certificates are required for the export of possum meat to Hong Kong, Taiwan and Japan. The certificates, as with all MAF certificates, are an assurance to our equivalent authority in the importing country that agreed market access conditions have been met by the New Zealand processor.

STOP PRESS

Taiwan has just agreed to waive the 28 day live holding period for possums prior to slaughter.

Research Watch

Swim and dunk washing on the way out for sheep and goats?

Swim washing of sheep before slaughter should be phased out according to the Animal Welfare Advisory Committee (AWAC).

AWAC, an independent advisory committee to the Minister of Food, Fibre, Biosecurity and Border Control, believes swim washing adversely affects sheep welfare and meat quality and that the practice is outdated in a trade environment which requires verifiable quality systems to ensure products are clean, green and humanely produced.

The Committee's findings are largely based on a 1996 survey by MAF Quality Management. The survey found 62% of plants swim wash most sheep at least once, often in combination with spray washing. Multiple washes were common at some plants.

The Committee believes the practice is stressful for sheep (even more so for goats), and has an adverse affect on the quality of meat as measured by ultimate pH. In addition, pre-slaughter stress may actually increase the levels of bacteria excreted by sheep. Swim washing is particularly stressful if animals are cold, in weak condition, or have been held off feed for a long period.

AWAC GUIDELINES

Until swim washing is phased out, AWAC believes the following standards will help safeguard the welfare of swim-washed sheep:

- Sheep which are not robust must not be swim washed.
- Sheep must not be swim washed more than once.
- Assistance must be available for woolly, trapped or backward-facing sheep during swim washing.
- Sheep must not be swim washed in very cold weather (freezing temperatures).

Research by the Technical Development and Risk Analysis group of the MAF Reg Meat and Seafood (see 'further reading' below) has found pre-slaughter washing (not restricted to swim washing) can also lead to higher rates of carcass contamination, particularly with long-wooled, dirty sheep. In consultation with industry, the Group is developing guidelines for processors which blend the practicalities of presenting sheep for slaughter, with optimum public health goals. The guidelines will be advisory only, and will be supported by a predictive spreadsheet model available to all premises.

MAF would like to see more incentives to encourage farmers to provide clean stock. A few meat plants dag very dirty stock at the farmer's expense and occasionally very dirty sheep are returned to the farm of origin.

FURTHER READING

A HACCP-based approach to hygienic slaughter and dressing of lamb carcasses.
M.E. Biss and S.C. Hathaway., New Zealand Veterinary Journal 46, pp167-172, 1998.
This takes a look at the effects of pre-slaughter washing (including swim-washing) on microbial contamination. It finds that visual contamination is not a reliable guide to the microbial load on lamb carcasses.



Meet our People

Sandra Daly Executive Manager

As Executive Manager of MAF Reg, it's Sandra Daly's role to ensure the organisation is adequately resourced and has effective systems for meeting its goals and objectives. She is also a member of the MAF Reg Senior Management Team which is responsible for the overall management of the Authority.

Having joined MAF at Invermay in 1987, Sandra has a long term view of MAF's progress and has seen a number of changes. She has been involved in MAF Reg strategy development and is particularly keen for MAF Reg to enhance its communication with stakeholders. "I am constantly astounded at the things our people are achieving for New Zealand and our primary industries. Making sure our stakeholders are aware of it all is a high priority for me."

On a personal note, Sandra (formerly Sandra Newman) recently remarried. She and her husband Cliff have purchased a section at Kuratau which they are developing and Sandra describes time spent there relaxing, boating, skiing and gardening as 'soul balm'.

ABOUT FOOD FOCUS

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

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