

FOOD focus

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Talking food safety

Communication has been the theme for MAF Food during the early part of 2001. Following up on our commitment for meaningful dialogue with stakeholders, we have been out on the road talking about what is happening in food safety and hearing their questions and concerns.

"It's really important that the changes we're making for food safety in New Zealand aren't made in isolation," says Sandra Daly, MAF Food Director Business Services.

"Everyone benefits from a better understanding of what is being done. People in the food industry are gaining confidence in the move towards a risk-based framework because they're getting a better insight into how it works. Likewise, groups who are concerned about safeguards against hazards in food are learning more about the systems we have and how MAF and the Ministry of Health are harmonising their approach to food safety."

Sandra says that the feedback received from the food industry and consumers alike has been extremely useful. "It's been a good reality check for us, and we intend to keep building on the dialogue we've started," she says.

The regional seminars advertised in the December 2000 *Food Focus* attracted a total of around 700 people to meetings at 13 venues during February and March. Sandra says the roadshow was open to all those with an interest in the food industry – farmers, producers, processors and others.

"There was a good number of people from the meat and dairy sectors, especially in the North Island. Those involved in quality assurance and Federated Farmers were also well represented."

Discussion ranged over many issues, some industry wide and some very specific. Among the general issues canvassed at the seminars were:

- the growing public interest in food safety
- consumer concerns
- managing risks to food safety and protecting New Zealand's reputation as a producer of safe food
- how farmers, producers and processors can help manage food safety risks

- how we are responding to the changing needs of our overseas customers in the face of BSE and other challenges
- the impact of new legislation including the Animal Products Act
- balancing the requirement to keep food assurance compliance costs down, with demands for greater levels of assurance from consumers.

Participants also raised some single issues for discussion, including antibiotic resistance, farm water quality and traceability of products from farm to plant. In fact, the content of the last seminar was quite different from the first as we modified the talks to meet demands.

Sandra says the response from people who attended the roadshows overall was very positive. "Of course there's always room for improvement, and one of the suggestions was that future meetings like this are targeted at individual sectors so that we can look at their individual issues in greater depth."

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Conversation is
the enemy of food
and good wine.

Alfred Hitchcock

E-Cert takes growing volumes in its stride

We've got the system in place – now we're going to work with industry to get it performing even better. That's the message to all E-Cert users from MAF Food's E-Cert Project Manager Ashley Mudford.

"We're keen to hear from industry about any suggested improvements in the way E-Cert can operate," he says.

Ashley has been delighted to see the seafood industry starting to come on board with E-Cert. He's urging those who have yet to take the plunge, to visit the MAF website (address below) and find out for themselves how the electronic documentation system can streamline the business of international trade.

"A large number of seafood premises are already using E-cert. The earlier everyone gets used to using on-line documentation, the fewer difficulties they will have later on," Ashley advises.

E-Cert, which operates from 'mirror' sites in Auckland and Wellington, is managing an ever-increasing volume of documents. In March a new peak of 28,500 documents were handled. New servers have been installed to improve performance even further.

Independent evaluation of the E-cert system shows that access to E-cert is about a third better than the average of the top 20 NZ web sites with internal monitoring showing the system is highly reliable and available. It has exceeded the target of 99.5% availability for seven of the last eight months.

Dairy produce assurance is also set to join E-Cert later this year. Ashley says that in comparison with meat and seafood product transactions, the dairy trade certification is expected to involve fewer transactions but each will have a much higher dollar value.

The system is also likely to provide benefits through closer cooperation between departments. For example, MAF Food is now holding discussions with Customs about ways E-Cert could be used

to help streamline procedures for exporters. This supports the Government's objective of reducing compliance costs.

At the same time, linkages between the MAF and Customs systems would help reduce the opportunities for potential fraud through misuse of export certificates, Ashley explains.

He says E-Cert has generated unexpected benefits, too. "It is expected to be a very sensitive barometer for the activities of our exporters, can help MAF in its planning to meet seasonal demand, and assist industry to become more efficient."

While initially established for use within New Zealand, E-Cert is starting to gain support from overseas governments. Canada, USA, Korea and some Middle East countries are among those showing an interest in receiving E-cert export certificates.

Registration and other information about E-Cert is available via the MAF website on www.maf.govt.nz/animalproducts/ecert/

STOP PRESS!

E-Cert scoops innovation award

E-Cert has been recognised as a leading-edge innovation at the annual GOVIS (Government Information System Managers) Awards, where it won the *On the Frontier* category. The GOVIS Awards are open to all non-profit organisations in central government. Among their aims are celebrating success, encouraging innovation and fostering leaders within the public sector's IT community. At lot of people have put considerable work into E-cert and MAF Food is very pleased to receive this prestigious New Zealand award.



Ashley Mudford with the GOVIS Award.

Getting it right

Not everyone gets it right first time. In fact of all the forms submitted through E-Cert, about 45 percent have to be resubmitted because of some error or omission in the way it was completed.

On an individual user basis, the resubmission rate varies from zero to four or five hundred percent. In other words, in extreme cases, all the forms have had to be completed four or five times before they're right.

"There are clearly some training and development issues around the use of

E-Cert in some cases and we're anxious to help individual businesses identify and address any problems," says Ashley Mudford.

"We're intending to provide each company with access to their resubmission rate for each user each month, to help them identify where any problems might lie. This should give them the necessary information to target further training and hopefully bring the resubmission rate down."

Ashley says this is another good example of the way information gleaned through E-Cert use can help individual users improve efficiency.

Consumer forum: spirited debate but moving forward

Consumer groups joined in a second round of discussions with MAF Food, the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Consumer Affairs in late March. The consumer forum follows a successful first meeting held in September last year.

The first part of the March meeting included some spirited debate as the participants worked through ideas on how the forum should be run. However, as the day progressed there was good constructive discussion on topics such as risk management programmes and a variety of other issues that concern consumer groups.

"No one else in the world has managed to successfully develop a forum where government and consumers can get together regularly to discuss food issues of mutual concern," said Group Director, Andrew McKenzie. "The consumer groups, and the government agencies involved are still getting used to working with each other, and, although it isn't all plain sailing, we're definitely making progress. There is a lot to be achieved through the forums and we're all committed to seeing them succeed."

The next consumer forum is scheduled for July 2001.

New Zealand's BSE status confirmed in top group

The safety of New Zealand food products, and the integrity of our systems for risk management, have been given a further, strong endorsement.

The European Commission (EC) has implemented a directive that places this country in an elite group of just 13 countries defined as 'highly unlikely to present a BSE risk'. BSE is the brain wasting disease Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy, also known colloquially as "mad cow disease".

The European directive follows a recommendation by the European Expert Scientific Committee (EESC), reported in *Food Focus* in September last year.

Consumers around the world are highly sensitive to the link between BSE and human cases of variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (vCJD), so the confirmation of this endorsement from Europe is excellent news for New Zealand meat exporters.

The most significant benefit of the directive is that New Zealand exporters will not be required to remove 'specified risk materials' (which include, among others, the spinal cord) from meat products destined for Europe. Having to remove these materials could have cost exporters up to \$30 million a year.

The EC directive is the culmination of years of patient work by MAF technical experts who have assembled New Zealand's case to have this country's BSE freedom recognised. The technical assessment of our case used the risk-based model that has been developed and promoted by New Zealand – a further endorsement of the way New Zealanders assess and manage risks associated with food products.

BSE is one of a group of brain wasting diseases known as transmissible spongiform encephalopathies (TSEs). Other TSEs include scrapie, which affects sheep and goats, chronic wasting disease (CWD) which affects deer and elk, and transmissible mink encephalopathy (TME), which has occasionally been reported in farmed mink since the 1960s. New Zealand's livestock remain free from TSEs, a fact recognised by the European Expert Scientific Committee.

There are various, as yet unproven, theories as to how BSE (first detected in the 1980s) arose in cattle. Among the suggestions have been:

- scrapie crossed the species barrier to cattle through the feeding of scrapie-infected bone meal to cattle
- it arose spontaneously in cattle

A large number of alternative hypotheses have been put forward, but none have yet found favour with mainstream researchers.

Ongoing confirmation of our TSE-free status is supported by an active programme of surveillance. There are a number of strict safeguards against TSEs entering this country and infecting livestock. These were an integral part of New Zealand's successful case to the EC and include:

- intensive monitoring and routine investigation of any animal showing signs of a nervous-type disorder
- restrictions on imports of risk material
- a ban on the feeding of ruminant protein to ruminant animals, through the Biosecurity (Ruminant Protein) Regulations 1999.

Because New Zealand livestock are largely grass-fed and not farmed in the intensive conditions associated with the spread of BSE in other countries, our risk is lower, and this has been recognised internationally. There is no room for complacency, however, and our defences against TSEs are based on a high level of vigilance and compliance with requirements, coupled with a growing body of scientific knowledge about these potentially devastating diseases.

Animal Products Act Update

In the December 2000 Food Focus we reported on progress as the Animal Products Act Part 2 was implemented. In this issue we catch up with the work that's being done as the new legislation is rolled out.

The various support systems required for implementation of the Animal Products Act are taking clearer shape as the food industry prepares to meet the 1 November 2002 deadline for registration of risk management programmes (RMPs).

Victor Walker, Project Manager (APA Implementation) in MAF Food's Animal Products Group is coordinating the changes. He says a strong partnership between MAF Food and industry is vital if the changes are to be managed successfully.

"We are heartened to see that some animal product businesses are already making good progress in developing HACCP-based risk management programmes," Victor says.

As this work is progressing, evaluators are being assessed and accredited by MAF Food. The evaluator's role will be to evaluate all the newly created RMPs. MAF Food would like to take the opportunity to invite all persons who would be competent to evaluate RMP's (particularly in the red meat area) to consider seeking accreditation. A larger pool of RMP evaluators is needed in New Zealand to respond to the growing demand for this function.

An application pack is available for evaluators and there is a published manual for evaluators. Also, specifications for evaluators, accredited persons, and recognized agencies are available. All this material is published through the Animal Products website.

Verification of RMPs, i.e. verifying that the programme is being implemented as intended, is a separate process to evaluation. For animal products to be sold in New Zealand verification will be contestible. In the meantime, overseas market access requirements for our major markets dictate that verification continues to be provided by the MAF Verification Authority for exported food products.

MAF deals with literally hundreds of enquiries from companies and individuals gearing up for the changes. Victor says the MAF website is a valuable information resource, and this way many of the more commonly asked questions are easily answered within minutes.

The gateway to this storehouse of very useful information is: www.maf.govt.nz/animalproducts/

Veterinary medicine standards firming up under ACVM Act

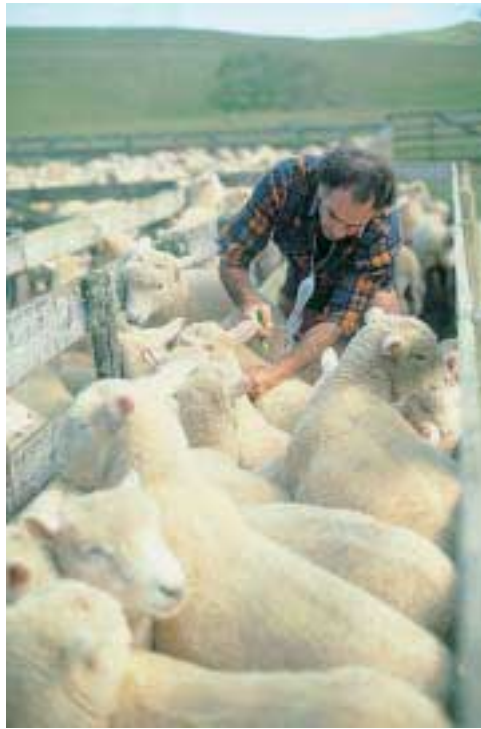
Veterinarians' discretion with prescription animal remedies will be more closely regulated under the Agricultural Compounds and Veterinary Medicines (ACVM) Act when it is implemented in July.

Debbie Morris, Director of MAF Food's ACVM Group, says regulations under the new Act are designed to improve the management of residues in food and animal welfare risk, while still giving veterinarians the flexibility to use the appropriate veterinary medicines where needed.

"Veterinarians will need to pay close attention to the conditions of use for animal remedies, because in many cases there will be restrictions limiting the use of products to certain species, to animals of a certain age and so on," Debbie says.

"The veterinarians' code of professional conduct as it relates to the use of prescription animal remedies will assume even greater importance under the new regime. For example there is a requirement that the animals must be under the veterinarian's direct care, and that continuing care should be available on an ongoing basis."

Debbie says 'consultation' and 'prescription animal remedies/veterinary medicines' are also closely defined in the code, and veterinarians will need to understand that they are fully accountable for the implications of prescribing decisions they make.



Another issue that concerns both veterinarians and farmers is that of 'off-label use'. This is where a licensed animal remedy is prescribed for use in a 'minor' species such as emu, deer or goats that are not covered in the product's label claim. Because of the small size of the New Zealand market and the cost of obtaining the data to support a licence, few products are licensed specifically for animals such as these.

At present, veterinarians are able to prescribe remedies for off-label use, provided food residue and animal welfare concerns are addressed. Debbie says off-label use will be accommodated more explicitly under the ACVM Act, through conditions on the registration of products.

"It's important to understand there is a vast difference between off-label use of a licensed animal remedy, and use of an unlicensed product. All licensed products have gone through a rigorous process to ensure that their use will not compromise any of the risk areas.

"There are no such safeguards with unlicensed remedies. Our focus in the regulation of animal remedies is on residues in food and welfare."

Farmers who are unsure about the use of particular animal remedies should consult their veterinarian, Debbie says.

Animal status declaration tightens food residue procedures

Farmers and veterinarians now have a greater responsibility for protecting domestic and international consumers through the Animal Status Declaration, now required under the Animal Products Act. This declaration has been required for animals being sent for processing since 1 April this year.

The declaration includes an assurance from the supplier of the animals that the animals are not within the meat withholding period specified for any animal remedy. Suppliers can be asked to produce records to verify the declaration.

If the supplier does not know whether animals have been treated, or what with, then the maximum withholding period must apply. This is 60 days at present, but is rising to 180 days from 1 September 2001, so there's a powerful incentive for suppliers to keep good animal health treatment records.

If animals have been treated with an unapproved remedy, they don't get past first base – they can never be used for human consumption.

If the animals have been treated with a licensed remedy, then the specified withholding period (if there is one) becomes the focus. The animals must be held back from slaughter until the period has elapsed.

Details of the new requirements can be accessed through the MAF website at www.maf.govt.nz/ACVM/publications/info_papers/info-minorspecies.pdf

Building a better understanding of *Salmonella* Brandenburg

Salmonella Brandenburg has leapt to prominence during the past four years as a disease that affects both animals and humans. Research is being carried out to understand more about the disease and how it spreads. Investigations to date have shown no evidence that sheep meat plays a significant role in transmitting *Salmonella* Brandenburg to people.

The first human cases of *Salmonella* Brandenburg appeared in New Zealand in the mid 1980s, although for the first few years there were only a few. But from 1996, when 28 people caught the disease, numbers began to rise sharply. In 1998, 1999 and 2000, there were 166, 175 and 184 cases respectively.

The rise in human cases is closely mirroring the geographic spread of the epidemic amongst farm animals. Many of the people who have been struck down by *Salmonella* Brandenburg have been the veterinarians and farmers who come into direct contact with affected animals. Of the 184 human cases last year, 161 were in the area of the South Island where the epidemic is working through farmed livestock – Canterbury, Otago and Southland.

On the farm, *Salmonella* Brandenburg mainly affected sheep from 1996, but in the last two years there has been a big increase in cases on dairy farms. The strain of *Salmonella* Brandenburg causing the South Island epidemic has not been isolated from North Island livestock to date.

Farm animals are generally affected through abortions and deaths in late pregnancy. Humans are laid low for up to six weeks with diarrhoea, fevers and stomach cramps. There has been no evidence to date that it causes abortions in humans.

MAF Food is coordinating a three-year risk assessment project to identify optimal points in the food processing chain, from farm to plate, to control *Salmonella* in sheep meat. There is a special focus on *Salmonella* Brandenburg. The Ministry of Health, Meat New Zealand, the meat industry, veterinarians, farmers, researchers and the animal remedies industry are all involved in the study.

The project is aimed at building a clearer picture of the risk to

humans from eating sheep meat. At this stage there has been no indication that meat plays a significant role in transmitting this particular strain of *Salmonella* Brandenburg.

The MAF-coordinated risk assessment project also involves a Massey University study of risk factors associated with the disease on farms (e.g. management factors, vaccination etc). Human cases are also being studied more closely to identify risk factors.

While the knowledge base is building, veterinarians, MAF and Schering-Plough Animal Health are promoting measures for preventing the spread of *Salmonella* Brandenburg from animals to humans. These include good hygiene practices, preventative vaccination of livestock and careful stock management.

Where did it come from?

Salmonella Brandenburg is one of some 2500 known salmonella species. Its better-known relatives such as *Salmonella* bovis-morbificans, *S.* Hindmarsh and *S.* Typhimurium have been a problem for New Zealand farmers since the 1950s, albeit a reasonably manageable one. The symptoms of salmonellosis from these types are generally confined to the gut and outbreaks usually occur early in the year.

Salmonella Brandenburg is different. First identified in Germany in the 1930s, the first cases in New Zealand were in humans in the mid 1980s and these were very occasional. Before 1996 there had only been a handful of cases detected in animals – pigs, dogs, goats, cattle, and even a takahe.

From 1997 it has all changed. *Salmonella* Brandenburg has emerged as a major cause of abortions in sheep, where the organism seems to prefer the uterus of heavily pregnant ewes. Twin bearers seem to be more susceptible.

Animals appear to become carriers and begin shedding the bacteria especially when they are stressed.

No-one knows for certain where this strain came from, and why it has become so virulent. However, it is in the nature of salmonella species for a previously obscure one to suddenly gain prominence and become the cause of an emerging disease.

Food industry gathering: mark your diaries!

Following the success of last year's food safety conference in Auckland, MAF Food is planning to repeat the exercise in October 2001. Government and food industry representatives will be invited to share their views and hear the latest on contemporary food safety issues at a two-day conference tentatively scheduled for 17-18 October.

Andrew McKenzie, MAF Food Group Director, says the enthusiastic response to last year's gathering shows there is a strong demand for information on trends affecting future directions for the industry.

Among the themes for the 2001 conference will be:

- Risk management programmes: how the food industry has more direct control over the way it meets food safety objectives
- Involving consumers in decisions about food safety
- European trends: animal diseases such as BSE and foot and mouth have a huge impact on consumer attitudes to food safety – what are the implications for New Zealand food producers?
- Directions for food safety administration in New Zealand.

Details for the conference are still being finalised, but there will be regular updates over the coming weeks. The registration form is expected to be circulated in July.

Meet our people: Peter Fairless, National Manager (Operations)

When a Canterbury University engineering lecturer told his students that 90 percent of them would end up as managers, Peter Fairless – along with the rest of his contemporaries – laughed long and loud. That was then.

Some 25 years on, MAF Food's National Manager (Operations) reflects that his lecturer may have known a thing or two after all.

Peter joined MAF in 1976 as a fresh graduate in Mechanical Engineering. He was employed by the then Meat Division of MAF as an assistant engineer, checking over the plans for meat processing plants. "I always thought I was going to be designing things," Peter laughs. "I'm a long way from that now!"

With a career in MAF stretching back a quarter century, Peter offers that increasingly rare and precious commodity in the public sector – institutional memory. In many ways his career has reflected the big changes in the way MAF interacts with the food industry.

He has worked through from the days when virtually everything a meat company did was dictated by MAF, to the very different working environment that's unfolding today under the Animal Products Act (APA) regime. Peter's focus these days is providing the management platform to deliver a range of regulatory functions under the APA.

One of the keys to this has been the development and maintenance of the IMSIS relational database that is used for the management of the licensing, approval, registration, accreditation and listing systems. What's evolving, using the web as the tool for publication, is a transparent system containing a wealth of data, parts of which can be viewed externally (e.g. by overseas agencies wanting to verify the credentials of an exporter). The IMSIS system also generates vital day-to-day information such as annual registration and listing reminders for people in the animal products business.

Peter says the web environment is a fluid and dynamic one. "It's allowing us to respond very quickly to people's information needs. We're currently looking at 'sectorising' some of the information/data we hold, creating gateways that will concentrate the information of key interest to specialist groups such as exporters," he explains.

His role has changed recently from National Manager (Engineering) to National Manager (Operations). This underscores a move from standard setting in licensing and construction, to an environment where industries have more control over the way they do things, within the framework to be set by risk management programmes.

While much of his effort is spent on the information databases, Peter also has a big direct communications role. With around 800 registered exporters and 500 listed homekill & recreational catch service providers among others there are plenty of enquiries to deal with as the APA is rolled out. Equally strong are the linkages within MAF to legal and policy staff.

He confesses that it doesn't really feel as though he has worked in the same place for 25 years. Having seen the evolution from MAF Meat Division to MAF Quality Management, then the creation of the state-owned enterpriseASURE NZ, the former MAF Regulatory Authority and now MAF Food, Peter feels as though he's started a new job every few years.

But while the shape of his organisation has changed over the years, he's accumulated an enormous depth of knowledge in the food processing sector during that time – something that's always appreciated by the many who call Peter to pick his brain on anything from licensed premises to exporter registration.

Outside his life within MAF, the born and bred Wellingtonian while kept busy with his family commitments, endeavours to pursue his love of outdoor pursuits, mainly yachting, kayaking, camping and mountain biking – interests he shares with his wife Jane and their three very active children.



Peter Fairless.

Access snippets



Bobby calf products to Canada

Eleven years of patient work by MAF market access and technical staff has paid off with the opening up of the Canadian market to bobby calf veal products from New Zealand. At issue had been a Canadian restriction on products from 'immature' animals. They had set the threshold for maturity at 14 days. The Canadian authorities have since accepted extensive published science submitted by MAF Food, which gives a much clearer definition in this area. The new market access arrangements were gazetted by Canada on 11 April and New Zealand requirements will be issued shortly.