

# FOOD focus

Issue 15 • Dec 2001

## Keeping our lines open

*Food safety issues continue to make headlines around the world. The intensity of the dialogue shows just how important it is for meaningful and clear communication on this and other food related issues.*

This principle applies across the board to:

- the partnership between consumers, regulators and food producers
- developing safety objectives and standards
- addressing consumer fears about food safety issues
- educating people about minimising risk through good food handling practices
- ensuring food producers, transporters, processors, exporters, retailers and others understand and implement food safety standards.

Because we think communication is so important, we're building on the theme started in *Food Focus* earlier this year. We look at the key role played by communication in our nation-wide efforts to keep New Zealand BSE free; there's a look back to the role of food safety scares; the MAF Food Dairy and Plant Products Group outlines its communication work; and we look at the 2001 MAF Food Conference.

*We wish all readers a Happy Christmas and prosperous New Year, and look forward to being in touch again in 2002.*



## Following the BSE trail

The recent detection of a fourth BSE-infected cow in Japan and cases in both Finland and Austria have highlighted challenges in regard to implementing effective measures to control BSE disease's pathways for spread.

MAF Food and industry have established a BSE Liaison Group to ensure that all affected parties are kept informed of developments and participate in implementing New Zealand's BSE programme. The group has met five times to date.

While it's accepted that BSE in the UK was spread through the feeding of animal protein to other animals, tracking everything in New Zealand that could spread the disease is exceptionally complicated. That is because material from slaughtered animals has so many uses, and is traded so widely and in so many forms.

Apart from the most obvious end-use – meat products in the supermarket chiller – products from cattle can find their way into fertilisers, animal feed, vaccines, petfood and a range of industrial products, some of which can end up back in the food chain.

Earlier this year MAF and industry conducted an analysis to reconsider all of the possible pathways for BSE into New Zealand and ways it could be spread among cattle and sheep. The analysis confirmed that all possible entry points into New Zealand had

been closed for many years, and that border controls were strong.

However, the review also identified areas where improvements could be made, to take advantage of scientific developments and recent overseas experience. Moves have already been made to boost the level of testing within New Zealand (see sidebar 'Protecting our trade' on p2). This will increase the confidence of our consumers and trading partners that New Zealand is highly unlikely to have BSE.

The tools to stop BSE getting into New Zealand, and barriers against its spread should a case ever occur ►

### Inside

**Food safety scares**

**Risk profiles**

**2001 MAF Food Conference**

**Prosecution news**

**Meet our people**

**NZ hosts Codex Committees**

### Quality Quote

**"Before food can taste good, first it must think good."**

Claude Levi-Strauss  
French anthropologist

## New Zealand Food Safety Authority: An update

In the last issue of *Food Focus* we announced that the Government had given the green light for an integrated agency that combined the food safety functions of MAF Food and the Ministry of Health. In effect this will bring food safety administration for exported food and the domestic market into line.

It had been hoped that the agency could be established in time for a start date of 1 January 2002. However, a heavy legislative programme has delayed the introduction of the Bill which makes the necessary changes to the relevant Acts: the Food Act, Dairy Industry Act and Meat Act.

It's now hoped the new agency, a semi-autonomous body to be attached to MAF, will be able to be launched on 1 July 2002. Once the legislative change has been made, other steps prior to launch date will include the appointment of a Minister and a CEO and setting of a strategic direction.

To recap, here are some of the main features and benefits of the new organisation:

- it will address concerns about inconsistencies in food safety administration in New Zealand
- consumers will benefit from having one agency responsible for food safety across the board
- the agency will reduce duplication that exists now and allow a consistent approach to food safety domestically and for export markets
- there will be an effective 'whole of government' approach to food safety
- the risk-based approach to food safety management will be integrated at all stages throughout the food 'chain' from pasture to plate
- ultimately food safety legislation – now covered by several Acts of parliament – will be integrated into one 'omnibus' Act.

*Food Focus* readers will be kept informed of developments with the new food agency in future issues.



► *BSE trail continued from p1*

here, range from import health standards, to regulations covering what animals eat.

For example, zoo animals which die must be buried or incinerated – they cannot be fed to other zoo animals. And a product as innocuous as blood and bone fertiliser cannot be spread onto pasture where it could be ingested by grazing animals.

Managing the BSE risk effectively not only requires effective rules – it also requires a tightly coordinated approach and excellent communication.

The BSE Liaison Group coordinated by MAF Food brings together the key players in New Zealand's defensive efforts against BSE. The group involves regulators, including MAF Biosecurity, MAF Food and the Ministry of Health, as well as consumers and industry groups such as the Meat Industry Association, Federated Farmers, petfood manufacturers, garden centres, animal health laboratories, veterinarians, academics, scientists, farmers, importers and retailers.

MAF BSE Programme Coordinator, Mirzet Sabirovic, says effective consultation and information flows are essential if BSE risks are to be managed properly. "It's no use just having government departments spelling out the rules," he says. "The risks have to be managed at many levels and in many places. Something as innocuous as an incorrectly labelled bag of fertiliser could provide a path for BSE."

Mirzet says the BSE Liaison Group is a valuable forum, which provides a way to target information to key groups. Other activities have included a mid-year mailout to all livestock owners detailing ways they could help – by ensuring their stock don't eat ruminant protein, and by keeping a close watch for suspicious symptoms. Garden centres, agricultural supply merchants and veterinarians have also been contacted.

Within MAF, the Director-General heads a BSE Steering Group, which takes care of several key activities:

- BSE surveillance (e.g. protocols for routine testing of cattle brain samples)
- Trade risk mitigation (identifying and managing risk pathways for BSE)
- International liaison (aligning New Zealand and international standards)
- Communications (coordinating key stakeholders through the BSE Liaison Group).

One of the richest sources of up-to-date information on BSE can be found on MAF's website at [www.maf.govt.nz/biosecurity/pests-diseases/animals/tse/index.htm](http://www.maf.govt.nz/biosecurity/pests-diseases/animals/tse/index.htm)

## Protecting our trade

Because BSE is also a crucial trade issue, communication with our trading partners is a frontline activity for MAF Food. Our BSE-free status came about only after years of painstaking work building New Zealand's case.

A current issue is the EU's decision to review BSE risk assessments from third countries, including New Zealand. Our dossier – the basis for our current BSE-free status – is due to be resubmitted by January next year.

One proactive step being taken by MAF Food is to increase the yearly number of cattle brain samples tested for BSE in New Zealand from the 300 recommended by the OIE (the world organisation for animal health) up to 2000. This expanded testing regime, while voluntary, will strengthen the evidence which underpins our animal health status.

# Food safety scares: Nothing's new under the sun

While the media hype might lead you to think otherwise, there's nothing new about food safety scares. And these scares, whatever their origins, will play an important role in the way the new food safety agency communicates with consumers and other stakeholder groups when it is established next year.

Dr Hugh Campbell of the Otago University Centre for Agriculture, Food and Environment told a recent meeting of MAF Food directors that some of the biggest food safety scares emerged back in the days of the industrial revolution.

"During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, food producers and consumers were separated for the first time," he said. "The peasant classes who had produced their own food became the working classes of industrial Europe."



That gulf is even wider today. The more that urban people learn about how food is produced, the less they like it, Dr Campbell said. For example the BSE issue in Europe had revealed what some cattle are fed, and consumers weren't impressed.

During the heyday of laissez faire capitalism, before there was much legal protection for consumers, the food industry was rocked by adulteration scandals – vitriol to make beer frothier, cyanide compounds to improve the taste of wine, and chalk dust to make bread whiter were just some of them.

"While scientists are viewed with suspicion by many consumers today, it was scientists who actually came to the rescue to help clean up the food industry during the 19<sup>th</sup> century," Dr Campbell said.

Tampering with food was just one challenge facing 19<sup>th</sup> century consumers. Poor hygiene helped spread food-borne diseases, and even then there was also deep suspicion about food technology.

Margarine, invented in 1885, provoked frenzied consumer resistance. Mark Twain railed against the new product as a fraud and a hoax, and the dairy lobby was quick to cash in on the consumer fears. Margarine was outlawed in some States of America; in others the law dictated it should be dyed pink or white to avoid its being passed off as butter.

Ironically New Zealand was the last jurisdiction in the world to 'decriminalise' margarine (in 1974), although its suppression in this country was more for industry protection than safety.

Dr Campbell said more recent food safety scares about irradiation and genetic modification showed the same characteristics as the margarine debate. "Concerns about irradiation started in the 1950s and are still here, so I'd expect the GM debate to go on for a while yet."

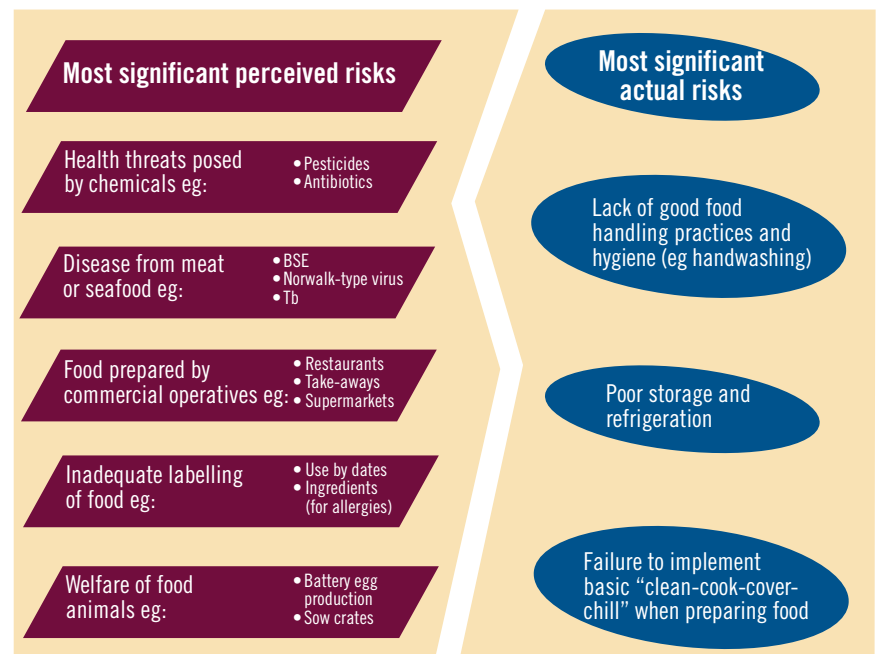
He said consumer perceptions about food safety risks are riddled with paradoxes. The aspartame/saccharine paradox is a case in point. Aspartame is one of the most widely tested food additives in the United States with no evidence that it is harmful ever discovered. Yet it has become the subject of a huge 'anti' movement, including many websites devoted to the subject.

Saccharine, on the other hand, has been associated with cancer in lab rats, yet it is widely accepted as a food additive. Similarly, a paper about a possible carcinogen in margarine, released in 1975, failed to capture the public imagination.

There is no apparent logic to consumer food safety concerns, Dr Campbell said. The periodic scares are simply part of the human condition.

"We are programmed to be suspicious about what we eat. There are profound paradoxes about food, and this is why our attitudes are complicated: It can taste good or foul; it can nourish us or poison us; it keeps us alive, but things are killed to feed us. This ambivalence about food is a cultural mechanism. A food scare is the mismanagement of people's inherent anxiety about food."

He said the contemporary trend is a 'flight to nature'. "There's a sense that science hasn't delivered. People are concerned about the environment and their health. Many people are now putting their faith in nature to provide the answer. The conventional wisdom is that natural = good and science and progress = bad."



# RESEARCH WATCH: Risk profiles give context for food safety issues

by Rob Lake, Institute of Environmental Science and Research (ESR), Christchurch

In an apparently ever-increasing list of risk related activities, risk profiles are the new kids on the block. They fulfil an important need early in risk management for food safety.

Risk profiles provide the current context for a food safety issue. Each issue involves a single hazard in a specific food or food group. The profiles are intended to allow risk managers to make decisions, which may involve immediate action to manage the risk, the commissioning of a fully fledged quantitative risk assessment, research to fill data gaps, or relegation of the issue due to low or negligible risk.

At present, only microbiological hazards are being addressed; how to handle chemical hazards as part of this process is being considered separately. The profiles will concentrate on New Zealand data, but also provide the international context.

The ESR Food Group are writing these risk profiles as part of a joint Ministry of Health (MoH)/MAF Food project.

The risk profiles are intended to be used by:

- Government: to underpin a coherent strategy for food safety in New Zealand
- Industry: for the development of risk management programmes, food safety programmes and product safety programmes – at a premises level or at an industry-wide code of practice level
- Research providers: for the identification of research priorities
- Codex Alimentarius Commission: as a vehicle for systematic inclusion of New

Zealand information into the Codex risk assessment and standard-setting process.

Risk profiles include most of the elements of a qualitative risk assessment as well as risk management information. They cover:

## **Hazard identification, including:**

- a description of the organism
- a description of the food group.

## **Hazard characterisation, including:**

- the adverse health effects caused by the organism
- dose-response information for the organism in humans, where available.

## **Exposure assessment, including:**

- data on the consumption of the food group by New Zealanders
- data on the occurrence of the hazard in the New Zealand food supply
- qualitative estimate of exposure to the organism (if possible)
- overseas data relevant to dietary exposure to the organism.

## **Risk characterisation:**

- information on the number of cases of adverse health effects resulting from exposure to the organism with particular reference to the food (based on surveillance data)
- qualitative estimate of risk, including categorisation of the level of risk associated with the organism in the food.

## **Risk management information:**

- a description of the food industry sector, and relevant food safety controls
- risk management options.

Profiles are not intended to be the last word on these subjects. Information will be incomplete in some areas, and it may not be possible to come to a decision on the risk posed by a particular food/hazard combination. This problem could be addressed by using overseas data, or doing further research in New Zealand.

There is immense benefit in having all the preliminary information necessary for risk management in one document. This makes the information much more accessible by all stakeholders interested in an issue.

It's not expected that risk profiles will generate any unexpected revelations or conclusions. However, the systematic collating of up-to-date information to support transparent, common sense decisions will be an important function. The profiles will be publicly available, with an opportunity for comment and review.

A difficult issue is how to rank food/hazard combinations for their importance. Even though various types of scientific data may be available (severity of illness, number of cases, economic cost), there is not yet a consensus on making these rankings.

A technical consultation with industry and regulators was held in early 2001. This article is part of a further round of publicity and consultation for the project, which will include a presentation to the next meeting of the MAF Consumer Forum.

For further information, please contact:

**Rob Lake, ESR, PO Box 29-181, Christchurch, [rob.lake@esr.cri.nz](mailto:rob.lake@esr.cri.nz)**

## Communications Focus for Dairy and Plants Group

Cut down on the jargon, make sure you're contacting the right people and tell us how changes affect us. Those were some of the key messages from dairy industry stakeholders to MAF Food's Dairy and Plant Products Group at a recent communications workshop.

The Group's Communications Coordinator, Philippa Ross says the feedback from the industry stakeholders at the workshop was positive, but also highlighted areas where the group could improve the way it communicates.

"We've taken these comments on board and addressed these issues in a new communications strategy for the Group," she says.

"One important task ahead of us is to review our communication networks to ensure we're reaching everyone we should. For example,

there are many new 'boutique' operations opening up in the dairy sector. We're keen to reach these new stakeholders."

Other highlights for the communication strategy will include:

- greater partnership with industry stakeholders
- a stronger focus on consumer interests
- making better use of existing 'channels' such as *Dairy Connection*, email alerts and other publications
- ensuring documents such as standards and policy papers are more readable, giving a clearer indication of how any changes might affect people in the industry
- reviewing the structure of the Group's website to make it easier to find relevant information.

Philippa can be contacted by phone on 04 470 2757 or email at [rossp@maf.govt.nz](mailto:rossp@maf.govt.nz)

# Food for thought at conference

Around 230 industry representatives attended MAF Food's biggest face-to-face communication event this year, the 2001 MAF Food Conference. The gathering was held at The Heritage Hotel in Auckland in October.

The theme of the conference was *Food Safety – Protecting Consumers and New Zealand's International Trade* and was chaired by MAF Food Assurance Authority Group Director Andrew McKenzie. Keynote speakers were Diane McCrea (a consultant to Consumers International in the United Kingdom), Caroline Smith de Waal – Director, Program on Food Safety from the Center for Science in the Public Interest, Washington and Ray Ellard of the Food Safety Authority of Ireland.

**Diane McCrea** noted that the BSE crisis in the United Kingdom had given greater momentum to a European trend of better consultation with consumers.

Diane said farming practices and food safety were now being re-examined and globally there is a greater demand for traceability to ensure consumer confidence in food products.

**Caroline Smith de Waal** spoke on the relatively new concept of Bio-Terrorism, and foodborne illness.

She said these public concerns would help to shape the food safety debate of the future.

“New Zealand is perceived as a ‘little country with a big roar’ on food safety issues, helping to reinforce this country’s clean, green image for food production.”

She said the future of US food safety lay in a single food safety

agency which would provide more consistency in ensuring food safety and quality.

**Ray Ellard** spoke on the experience of setting up the Food Safety Authority of Ireland.

He said the old philosophy of ‘no comment’ with the objective of staying out of the media must be replaced by a new philosophy of co-operation and transparency – the objective now must be stay in the media and support field personnel.

“Food safety has to be marketed; it must address consumer fears and beliefs as well as food safety. Major health gains can be achieved with strong positive messages on nutrition, and good practice has to be acknowledged.”



Left to right: MAF Acting Director General Larry Fergusson, keynote speakers Caroline Smith de Waal and Diane McCrea, and MAF Director General designate Murray Sherwin at the MAF Food Conference in October. (Murray Sherwin took up his position on 12 November.)

## Prosecution news

### Flouting of law ends in prison sentence

A man who sold the unlicensed animal remedy Fertex for more than a year in breach of a High Court injunction against its sale and use was sentenced to one month in prison in September. In the High Court in Hamilton Justice Paterson found that Robert Pickering had ‘knowingly and blatantly sold and used Fertex during the period in breach of the terms of the injunction’.

Mr Pickering developed the injectable zinc-based product a decade ago, and claimed it could add \$1 billion to the New Zealand economy a year if used by half of farmers. Some users had reported prevention of facial eczema and increases in sheep meat growth, fertility, milk production, and wool quality, though treated animals also suffered lesions which in some cases became ulcerated abscesses.

MAF Director of Agricultural Compounds and Veterinary Medicine Debbie Morris says the rare injunction and the resulting custodial sentence for breaching that injunction reflect the case’s seriousness. She says Mr Pickering had opportunities to apply for licensing in order to sell and use the product, but failed to do so.

“MAF welcomes the development of any remedy proven to be acceptable from domestic food safety, animal welfare and international trade perspectives,” Debbie says. “In the case of Fertex, however, we have not been given technical information to show

that it is manufactured in an approved facility and that it meets accepted minimum standards to show safety to targeted species, users, consumers and the environment.”

For more information contact Debbie Morris, Tel. 04 474 4141.

### Unauthorised use of 1080 kills dog

A Levin farm worker’s efforts to eradicate pests from a forest park hut went wrong when it left a dog dead from 1080 poisoning on April Fools’ day last year.

The worker was fined \$250 and ordered to pay court costs and solicitors fees in the Upper Hutt District Court under the Pesticides Act 1979 for using the controlled pesticide sodium fluoroacetate (1080) without being an approved operator.

### Illegal disposal of meat risk to domestic health

A person in charge of AgResearch Ruakura’s experimental slaughterer facility was found guilty in the Hamilton District Court earlier this year of selling meat not slaughtered at a licensed abattoir. An associate who operated a licensed homekill facility was also found guilty under the Meat Act 1981. They were fined \$6000 and \$3000 plus fees and costs respectively.

The defendant told MAF Food he’d struggled with having to dispose of perfectly edible carcasses, and saw an opportunity to make some money from the meat.

## Meet our people: Dylan Hazlehurst: Website Coordinator – MAF Food

When Dylan Hazlehurst first started his training he wanted to be an engineer and architect, but now he builds and designs websites as website coordinator for MAF Food. Dylan works on the site [www.maf.govt.nz/food](http://www.maf.govt.nz/food), updating and adding new information and news each day.

“Various business groups in MAF are increasingly using the website to publish important material, and often it’s the only place where you can find that information; the website is an essential part of our communications policy,” Dylan says.

The website attracts more than 500,000 hits a month and Dylan says many visitors return regularly to look at the site’s content. “It’s a very industry-focused site, and we are always looking to

improve to meet users’ needs.” Suggestions on how to improve the site can be emailed to [Hazlehurstd@maf.govt.nz](mailto:Hazlehurstd@maf.govt.nz)

Dylan grew up on the West Coast at Fox River before moving to Christchurch and then Wellington to study engineering, philosophy and architecture, emerging with a Bachelor of Building Science. He first got into web design after discovering his new computer could be used for applications other than drafting. He joined MAF in 1998 after a stint overseas.



Dylan Hazlehurst.

## New Zealand leads world in antibiotic resistance monitoring

Both within New Zealand and internationally concerns have been raised about the possible association between antibiotics used routinely to protect the health of animals and the problem of growing resistance to antibiotics by some micro-organisms.

Medicines for use in animals – including antibiotics – are registered by the Agricultural Compounds and Veterinary Medicines Group of MAF Food Assurance Authority following a stringent approval process. In 1999 MAF Food Assurance Authority and the New Zealand Animal Remedies Board, working with the Ministry of Health, responded to the concerns and commissioned an expert panel to review not only the international situation but also the implications for New Zealand.

All antibiotics licensed for mass medication of animals in New Zealand have now been assessed by this panel. Where potential resistance problems were identified in antibiotics of human health significance, action has been taken. Some products are no longer licensed and additional controls have been added as necessary. All other antibiotics used in animals in New Zealand are also being reviewed and actions taken.

Antibiotics are used in some animal and poultry rearing systems, not to promote growth, but to protect animals from diseases that impair their health and welfare.

In instances overseas, where this practice has been banned without the opportunity for a change in farm management practices over time, it has actually resulted in an initial increase in the therapeutic use of antibiotics for animal health and welfare reasons. In many cases, the antibiotic used therapeutically is more important to human health than the product it replaced.

The Ministry of Health has monitored the prevalence of antibiotic resistance among important human pathogens since 1972. To date there has been no evidence that the use of antibiotics in animals has prompted resistance in any human pathogens to antibiotics used in human medicine.

New Zealand is well ahead of the rest of the world in this matter. In a country so dependent upon our reputation as a producer of safe food, protecting both our animal welfare and human health are priorities.

## New Zealand hosts international food standards meetings

New Zealand is hosting two major international food safety meetings in the new year.

The meetings are of committees of the Codex Alimentarius – the global food standards agency established by the Food and Agriculture Organisation and the World Health Organisation. The primary objective of Codex is to protect the health of consumers and promote fair practices in food trade.

The meeting of the Codex Committee on Meat and Poultry Hygiene is being held in February, chaired by MAF’s Food Assurance Authority Director, Dr Andrew McKenzie.

Dr McKenzie says the meeting is a significant one. “It’s the first meeting of this committee since 1993, when it was adjourned following a major review of the codes of practice covering the hygienic processing of various meat products.”

Since the committee’s formation, New Zealand, with its strong meat industry, has chaired, hosted and managed the meetings. Dr McKenzie says there have been a number of informal approaches

in recent years to reactivate the committee in the light of recent changes in the area of food safety.

The February meeting will review existing codes of practice – better aligning them with the principles of the WTO Sanitary and Phytosanitary Agreement and incorporating the latest thinking on risk analysis.

In April, New Zealand is hosting another Codex committee meeting – the Codex Committee on Milk and Milk Products. This meeting will focus on standards for different dairy products such as creams and fermented milk products. There will be a review of individual cheese standards for different varieties. And significantly for New Zealand as a major dairy exporter, the committee will look at a model export certificate for dairy products. Currently New Zealand produces hundreds of different customised certificates for different markets with differing requirements. A single model would make export certification much simpler.

The meeting will be chaired by the MAF Food Assurance Authority’s Director of Programme Development, Steve Hathaway.