



foodfocus

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Our changing world

The times, they are a changing.

Never has a truer word been spoken. The tragic events of September 11 along with recent threats to food safety in New Zealand have illustrated just how much times have changed. Although these threats have not been realised, we, along with the rest of the world, are living in a state of heightened awareness to potential threats to our safety, including the safety of our food supply.

There have been incidents recently of 'white powder' being found on packaged food products. That, understandably, has caused concern to the food industry and consumers. So far these food scares have been false alarms but we cannot afford to be complacent when it comes to ensuring our food is safe to eat.

The police and the New Zealand Food Safety Authority are working alongside other agencies to ensure a consistent approach to the way these hazards are managed. In the words of Winston Churchill we must "let our advanced worrying become advanced thinking and planning."



However it is important to remain vigilant to the possibility that in today's environment food may be, or may have been tampered with. Serious food tampering in New Zealand, however, is rare. If you suspect food has been tampered with do not taste, eat, sniff, touch or move it. Don't handle it unnecessarily, isolate it and contact the police.

In normal circumstances, the first point of contact for food complaints is a health protection officer at your local public health unit. But because food tampering is a criminal act it is best to call the police in the first instance.

If someone has become ill from eating a suspected contaminated food, call an ambulance immediately.

More information on food tampering can be found on the NZFSA's website – www.nzfsa.govt.nz.

Some signs that food may have been tampered with include:

Broken seals, unusual stains and smells and damaged packaging or other breaks in packaging.

In other areas, such as unsupervised food areas, look out for suspicious activity especially around condiments or utensils used with food such as straws or plastic cutlery. If you see anything suspicious, contact the police.

Food is regulated in a number of ways in New Zealand to ensure it is safe for consumers.

Many food businesses in New Zealand are proactive in ensuring the security of their products.

Quality Quote

All I ask of food is that it doesn't harm me.

Michael Palin.

NZFSA plans domestic food review

The New Zealand Food Safety Authority is reviewing New Zealand's domestic food programme.

The review was officially made public by NZFSA Executive Director Dr Andrew McKenzie at the Authority's inaugural conference in Auckland on March 25.

"When the NZFSA was set up in July 2002, one of the Government's expectations was that it would review the domestic food regulatory programme," Dr McKenzie said.

"Domestic food covers all food sold and produced in New Zealand, including food sold in supermarkets, cafes and restaurants. At this stage we are formulating a strategy.

"The ultimate aim of this review is to improve food safety for consumers. We want a system that is practical and consistent and one that protects consumers. At the same time we need to be mindful of regulatory and compliance costs. We'll be working hard to strike a balance between these issues. Naturally we'll be consulting with the industry and others involved in the regulatory programme."

"One proposal we are currently looking at is the idea of food control plans. These would be put in place by food businesses utilising NZFSA recognised codes of practice, models and templates. The plans would be based on relevant good hygienic and good manufacturing practices and be based on the HACCP (Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point) principles. They would continue to incorporate science-based and risk based approaches to food control wherever appropriate. This is only one proposal that we will be considering in the review but nothing is set in concrete at this stage," Dr McKenzie said.

However any proposals will need to take into account work already done on food safety programmes. "It is clear to NZFSA that something needs to be done about the domestic food sector. The current hygiene regulations that apply to most food businesses are outdated and enforcement of them is inconsistent."

"Consultation with the industry has already begun and we expect the whole process will take several years," Dr McKenzie said.

Surveys reveal home truths

A review of surveys carried out on food handling in the home has found that a substantial proportion of all foodborne disease is caused by improper food preparation practices in the home.

Consumer Food Handling in the Home: A Review of Food Safety Studies was carried out by Elizabeth C Redmond and Christopher J Griffith of the University of Wales in Cardiff and published in the January edition of the Journal of Food Protection.

The authors reviewed consumer food safety studies carried out in a number of countries, including New Zealand, since about 1995.

The report says that while restaurants, cafeterias and bars are the most frequently cited locations where foods implicated in reported food-borne disease outbreaks are consumed, it has been reported that illness arising from foods eaten at home is three times higher than that arising from foods consumed in cafeterias.

"Over the past decade, up to 87 percent of reported foodborne illness outbreaks in the United Kingdom, Europe, Australia, New Zealand, the US and Canada have been associated with food prepared or eaten at home."

"One of the most notable conclusions extrapolated in this



review is that consumer knowledge, attitudes, intentions, and self-reported practices determined by intermediary means such as interviews and questionnaires, do not correspond well with actual observed behaviours," the report says.

More disturbingly many surveys indicated that a substantial number of people in Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand lacked knowledge of key food handling behaviours.

"Therefore consumers may not even be aware that they are implementing unsafe practices. Although perceptions of the risk of foodborne disease appear to be generally accurate, a considerable number of consumers have demonstrated

optimistic bias, which may impede attempts to improve food-handling practices through education."

While the intentions of consumers may be to practice safe food handling, they often don't.

The NZ Foodsafe Partnership is working hard to educate people about safe food handling practices in the home. More information on the Foodsafe Partnership can be found at www.foodsafe.org.nz and the report can be found at www.foodprotection.org/publications/JFP.htm under direct link to JFP.

It's our conference ...

One dropped porridge out of his shoe onto the floor, another sang a French song Edith Piaf-style, some were controversial, others funny. But they all had one thing in common –



Dick Hubbard, owner Hubbards Foods.

The New Zealand Food Safety Authority's inaugural conference has been hailed a success by most that attended.

"The conference gave our stakeholders the opportunity to hear what NZFSA was working on, what our plans for the future are and how we intend to develop those. But most importantly it gave NZFSA the opportunity to hear what stakeholders wanted and what was concerning them," says Sandra Daly, Communications and Business Services Director.

The two-day conference themed on Building and Maintaining Confidence in New Zealand Food was held at Auckland's Stamford Plaza Hotel on March 25 and 26.

It was well-attended with more than 250 participants on the first day.

Minister for Food Safety Annette King opened the conference with a report card on the first nine months of the NZFSA. She said there was still a lot of work to be done.

"Maybe the Authority has not quite got an 'A' yet for having achieved everything and maybe there's still a long way to go to get to where we want to be, but the Authority definitely deserves an 'A' for the ambitions it has for food safety in New Zealand,"

Ms King announced the Authority's review of the imported foods programme and the review of the domestic food sector.

"As Minister for Food Safety, I have outlined a number of requirements that must come out of the review. The programme must deliver improvements for consumers. It must ensure clear lines of accountability and it must have the support of those involved," she said.

Hubbard Foods owner Dick Hubbard, who showed his dedication to his business by emptying raw porridge from his shoe, acquired from the factory floor that morning, onto the



Lou Carson, US Food & Drug Administration.



Annette King, Minister for Food Safety.



Andrew McKenzie, Executive Director NZFSA.

food

conference room floor, said he wanted to see a more co-ordinated approach to food safety with Australia.

“I believe there are distinct advantages to both countries, to industry, to everyone involved if we can have a more common approach in the future,” he said.

He urged the industry to invest more in consumer education, to be proactive rather than reactive and he urged more sharing of information and expertise between regulators and the industry.

After dinner speaker, chef, author and television personality Peta Mathias caused a stir by saying those at the dinner were lucky to be involved in the “oldest profession in the world” – food.

“The reason you and I are so lucky to be involved in this profession is that eating and drinking makes you feel good.”

But she said New Zealand was “a bit behind the 8 ball” in marketing itself as a food destination.

“I think we see ourselves as a wine destination but does the average tourist overseas know we have very good wine and primary produce and we have good cooking?” she asked.

She said New Zealand tourism bodies were not interested in marketing New Zealand as a food destination. They were still interested in marketing New Zealand as a land of geysers, natural beauty and action adventure.

New Zealand Meat Industry Association Executive Director Brian Lynch said the creation of the New Zealand Food Safety Authority as a semi-autonomous body, with a clear mandate and under strong leadership, had contributed to an improved relationship between the regulator and the meat sector.

“The physical proximity of the Animal Products Group and the Verification Agency has undoubtedly helped.

“From the meat sector viewpoint we would expect the gains made in better communication and delivery of service to be consolidated if the VA was to formally shift inside the FSA. We believe logic and commonsense would underpin such a move.

“It would be in keeping with the emerging trend among our trading partners towards the creation of food safety authorities with a clear focus on consumer interests. This is in contrast to traditional ministries of agriculture presumed to give priority to the concerns of producers.”

Papers presented by speakers at the conference can be viewed on our website www.nzfsa.govt.nz.



Sue Dibb, National Consumer Council, United Kingdom.



Fran Wilde, former CEO Trade New Zealand.

“*The reason you and I are so lucky to be involved in this profession is that eating and drinking makes you feel good.*”



Peta Mathias entertains with a song.

NZFSA calls in independent expert

The New Zealand Food Safety Authority has called in an independent expert to undertake a literature review on research surrounding the A1/A2 milk debate.

Former Heart Foundation chief executive Professor Boyd Swinburn has agreed to review all literature on A1 and A2 milk including research examining a possible link between milk protein consumption and heart disease and insulin-dependent diabetes that was released earlier this year.

Professor Swinburn is a lecturer at Deakin University in Melbourne, Australia. "At this stage we believe a responsible step would be to get the research reviewed by an expert. We are pleased Professor Swinburn has agreed to do this for us," Dr Bob Boyd, Principal Advisor, Public Health Medicine at the NZFSA said.

In the latest study, two Auckland researchers compared a selection of data from 20 affluent countries, and based on that

questioned a correlation between the amount of A1 Beta-casein and milk protein consumed in a country and the national rate of coronary heart disease. They also questioned a similar correlation between A1 Beta-casein consumption and the rate of childhood type-1 diabetes. "But the research was inconclusive and we have not found any evidence to date that would make us change our position on milk thus far," Dr Bob Boyd said.

"The NZFSA is also asking anyone with any information which has already been made public on this topic to share it with us. This will help in the review of the literature," Dr Bob Boyd said.

In the meantime, the NZFSA stands by its earlier statement that milk is nutritious and beneficial and should remain part of a balanced diet. "New Zealanders can lower the rate of heart disease by quitting smoking, increasing exercise and reducing the proportion of saturated fats in their diet as promoted by the New Zealand Heart Foundation," Dr Bob Boyd said.

Strategic Review of Imported Foods

The NZFSA is to commission an independent review of arrangements controlling the importation of food and food related products into New Zealand.

Terms of Reference for the review have been completed and consultation has begun. The aim of the review is to identify stakeholder needs and expectations, identify major food safety and security threats and make recommendations on cost effective ways that the existing import controls could be improved.

"International trade in food and food related products continues to grow at a rapid rate," NZFSA Director Tim Knox says. "Foods imports into New Zealand have increased significantly since 1996. This has led to an emergence of new risks and concerns over the safety and security of the food supply. A number of countries have reviewed and strengthened the measures they have in place to ensure food imports are safe and secure," he says.

One of the aims of NZFSA's strategic direction is to ensure all food imported into New Zealand complies with our standards. "Given this objective and the changes that have occurred in the international environment, it is timely that a strategic review of arrangements for ensuring the safety and security of food and food related products imported into New Zealand is carried out."

The review will be carried out by an independent expert who has a sound knowledge of relevant national and international issues, as well as a wide constituency within the food industry sector. It will be carried out this year with a final report provided to NZFSA by December 2003. The Terms of Reference Document is available on the NZFSA website, www.nzfsa.govt.nz.

PAR Operational Policy being worked on

The New Zealand Food Safety Authority has received 49 submissions on the draft Operational Policy on Prescription Animal Remedy (PAR) products. The submissions have come from a variety of groups and individuals but most have raised the issue of increased risk relating to animal welfare, agricultural security and trade in primary products.

It has been suggested that some of the assumptions used by NZFSA to develop the draft policy are incorrect. Agricultural Compounds and Veterinary Medicines Director Debbie Morris says the Compliance and Investigation Group is currently completing 'slice of life' audits to determine just what is happening with the prescribing of animal remedies. "Then we will be looking at how to deal with the issues raised in the submissions and more consultation with representative groups."

Ms Morris says from information received so far from the industry and audits, there appears to be some areas that need clarification. "There seems to be some confusion around why a PAR policy needs to be developed at all. Unlike the Animal Remedies Act, the ACVM Act does not have any provision for assigning PAR status to products or providing for veterinary discretionary use. This is done by putting conditions of registration on products or by the use of standards and codes of practice."

There was also a high level of concern expressed in submissions over PAR users being able to set themselves up as traders, concern about a lack of training, and confusion over the controls and how the system might work. "Obviously there needs to be some clarification around issues like this and we will ensure that this policy is clear and precise. We believe that current practices of veterinary prescribing and supplying make good sense. We are, however, recommending a more robust system that takes into account the risks around trading, and a draft standard has been suggested," Ms Morris says.

It is hoped the process will be completed by the end of May. A summary of the submissions is available on our website, www.nzfsa.govt.nz

Meet our People: Susanna Barris, Executive Co-ordinator, Compliance and Investigation Group

Imagine sitting in a restaurant in China with your husband-to-be barking like a dog beside you.

For Susanna Barris and her partner Bukha it was really the only way they could communicate that they didn't want to eat dog meat. "China was the most difficult backpacking experience, but the most rewarding," Susanna says.

And despite the stories she had been told about the food in China, she claims it was the best she experienced during her three and a half years travelling overseas. "Probably from the food point of view, China was my favourite place. It was an absolute culinary sensation. Everywhere we went in China the food was delicious, the tea was delicious. I can see why it's such an old tradition and the way they cook is fast and fresh."

Bukha wasn't averse to the odd moo of a cow or clucking of a chicken to get what he wanted either. And Susanna says because of this they knew what they were eating – well most of the time anyway. "It actually was difficult sometimes and we had been warned that they eat dog. We were careful and Bukha would make animal noises in restaurants to make sure we were getting the right meat."

Susanna has been working with NZFSA for one year. It was her first job back in New Zealand after spending three and a half



years working and travelling overseas.

"I look after the compliance assessors and investigators who live and work all over the country from the top of the North Island to the bottom of the South Island ... They keep me busy, I get phone calls all the time."

Among other things, Susanna finalises the audit reports and organises the distribution of them. Some are small, some are large.

"They've just done (an audit) of the transport industry, transporting meat around New Zealand. The reports come back to me after they have gone to peer review and I distribute them. I have contact with all the groups within NZFSA really because I make sure everyone is getting what they need."

Susanna also represents CIG on a number of committees in Wellington. The CIG team has 18 staff, only two of them are based full-time in Wellington. However another full-time staff member is to start in Wellington very soon.

"They are a great team to work for. I think a big part of the job is making sure they have contact with somebody else in the group. Because they work remotely and by themselves and spend most of their time with clients, I think they enjoy the contact with Wellington, and whether they need to chat about their day or get something done, I am here for them," she says.

GM-free labelling system

Feedback is being sought on a discussion paper on the development of a voluntary GM free labelling system.

The paper, prepared by the Ministry of Consumer Affairs and the New Zealand Food Safety Authority, is the result of a recommendation from the Royal Commission on Genetic Modification and was released on April 11.

The Commission identified an information gap between mandatory labelling requirements and consumer demand for information about food that doesn't contain GM material and has not been manufactured using a genetic modification process. The paper:

- sets out the issues around defining what GM free might mean
- identifies the parameters/boundaries within which GM free claims may be tested and a labelling system must be developed
- examines some of the reasons why consumers and suppliers may wish to become involved in developing a labelling

system, and uses these to identify what information a labelling system could (or should) provide

- looks at labelling as a tool to provide consumer information, and specific issues associated with the use of a GM free label
- looks at the purpose of a voluntary labelling system
- presents possible options for a voluntary labelling system
- introduces some of the issues that should be considered when looking at possible labelling systems.

Submissions on the discussion paper close on Friday, May 30.

Copies of the paper are available from the Ministry of Consumer Affairs (www.consumeraffairs.govt.nz) or NZFSA (www.nzfsa.govt.nz)



Food Focus is issued by the New Zealand Food Safety 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. New Zealand Food Safety Authority, 86 Jervois Quay, PO Box 2835 Wellington. Phone 04-463-2500, Fax 04-463-2501. Food Safety Concerns 0800 NZFSA1 (0800 693 721). Website: www.nzfsa.govt.nz. Food Focus welcomes feedback and suggestions for future editions. Please contact: Sharon Williams, Senior Communications Advisor, Email: sharon.williams@nzfsa.govt.nz