



foodfocus

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NZ Food Safety Advisory Board arrives

A recent trip to Sydney highlighted the importance of food safety education for new Food Safety Advisory Board chair Fran Wilde.

While there she was served food by a person wearing gloves but handling her food without tongs and taking her money with the same hand. "That incident exemplified to me the value of education. You can have all the rules and regulations in the world but it (safe food handling practices) has to come from the heart as well as the mind. People handling food have to believe themselves that good practice is worthwhile. Education is the key and the whole publicity/communications area is critical," the former Wellington Mayor and Member of Parliament says.

The New Zealand Food Safety Advisory Board had its first meeting in July and is about to get down to the serious business of advising Minister for Food Safety Annette King on the effectiveness and efficiency of the whole food safety regime. It's been a slow but steady start but Ms Wilde expects it to get busier from the next meeting in November. "We expect a low key start. We won't be out pounding the drums," Ms Wilde says.

The Board has been set up to assure the Minister for Food Safety that New Zealand food policy incorporates the range of consumer, industry and health outcomes sought by the Government and that the interests of a wide range of stakeholder groups are taken into account.

Ms Wilde says that judging by the first meetings the Board will be an interesting one. "My initial impression of the Board is that there is a high level of energy and commitment. The members are all pleased to be there and there has been some very lively discussion around the table – they are not shrinking violets."

"The group contains considerable expertise, knowledge and experience in the different aspects of food safety from health right through to production and processing, as well as significant consumer representation. It isn't often that you see an advisory board with that kind of strength."

The Board will review the work of the New Zealand Food Safety Authority through its strategies, business plans and any other policy initiatives the Authority proposes. It will also consider initiatives proposed by other agencies and which could have an impact on food safety.



Fran Wilde.

"It's likely we will get an early look and give some feedback which we hope will be useful prior to public consultation. We will also monitor stakeholders and if there are any significant issues will raise them with the Authority and the Minister if necessary. In addition, we'll be keeping an eye on emerging issues."

The Board has already begun to identify areas that it believes may be critical. In addition to its core brief – the effectiveness of the food safety regime, it sees education, labelling, traceability, cost effectiveness and auditing, as just some of the high profile issues that might confront it in the future.

Members of the Board have been appointed for a two year period.

They are: **David Russell**, Chief Executive, Consumers' Institute, representing consumers; **Patsy Gordon**, Consumers' Forum on Food Safety representative and Rural Women NZ member representing consumers; **Melino Maka**, Pacific Island representative on Consumers' Forum on Food Safety, representing consumers; **Percy Tipene**, Te Waka Kai Ora, Maori producer; **Dr Donald Campbell**, Medical Officer of Health, Palmerston North, representing health professionals; **Professor Ian Shaw**, Food Safety Programme Leader, Institute of Environmental Science and Research Ltd (ESR), representing science providers; **Brenda Cutress**, Executive Director, New Zealand Grocery Marketers Association, representing food processors; **Tom Lambie**, President, Federated Farmers, representing food producers; **Colin Harvey**, President, Animal Remedy and Plant Protection Association and Managing Director of Ancare, representing food "interface" groups; **John Albertson**, Chief Executive, New Zealand Retailers Association, representing retailers; **Brian Lynch**, former Executive Director Meat Industry Association and Direct Food and Beverage Exporters Council, representing exporters.

Quality Quote

"Never eat more than you can lift."

Miss Piggy

Food Safety in Pregnancy

Knowing what to eat and what not to eat during pregnancy can be difficult but a new booklet produced by the New Zealand Food Safety Authority should make life a little easier for pregnant women.

The booklet, *Food Safety in Pregnancy*, is a practical guide that outlines the different foods and the risk they pose to mothers and their unborn babies. It lists types of foodborne illness, how they can affect pregnant women and their babies and how women can help to avoid them.

“Foodborne illness upsets the lives of thousands of people in New Zealand each year,” NZFSA Communications and Business Services Director Sandra Daly says.

“Pregnant women and their babies are more at risk because their levels of immunity are lower than usual. Food by its very nature is risky. The purpose of the *Food Safety in Pregnancy* booklet is to help pregnant women manage some of those risks. And while there are no guarantees, at least women will know by following the advice in this booklet they have done all they can to keep themselves and their babies safe,” Mrs Daly says.

The booklet gives practical advice on preparing, cooking and storing food safely as well as good basic general advice on other issues for pregnant women. Those issues include eating out, the use of folic acid, mercury in fish, safety around pets and farm



Minister for Food Safety Annette King launches the Food Safety in Pregnancy booklet helped along by Deb Parton, the model used in the booklet, her baby daughter Lily and partner Andy.

animals, and the consumption of alcohol during pregnancy. Advice on safe gardening and overseas travel is also given. The booklet was launched at Parliament by Minister for Food Safety Annette King. It is available from public health units or from the New Zealand Food Safety Authority.

Food safety survey provides good benchmark

New Zealanders think food safety standards have improved over the past five years and that our standards are better than other similar Western countries.

A survey carried out by UMR Research for the New Zealand Food Safety Authority on food safety issues shows that 58 percent of people surveyed believed that food standards were getting better as opposed to 17 percent who said they were getting worse. Forty-three percent of those surveyed said our food safety standards were better than other comparable Western countries.

The study, the first to be commissioned by the New Zealand Food Safety Authority since it was set up in July 2002, was undertaken to provide benchmark information on food safety issues amongst New Zealanders. The key objectives were to measure awareness and knowledge of food safety issues, to gauge the level of concern about food safety issues at different outlets and for different foods, and to uncover common perceptions about food safety.

It also measured awareness of appropriate food safety practices, attitudes towards food safety practices, awareness and confidence in Government monitoring and enforcement of food safety standards, the incidence of foodborne illness, observed poor food safety practices and awareness of the New Zealand Food Safety Authority.

Both qualitative and quantitative surveys were carried out and consisted of a telephone survey and focus groups.

The survey found that 44 percent of respondents had some concern about food safety issues in New Zealand. The foods that respondents were most concerned about were chicken, shellfish and food displayed in warming ovens such as pies. In general females were more likely to be concerned about particular foods than males. Fresh fruit and vegetables, cheese, and canned food were of least concern to respondents.

Food related issues most concerning respondents were salmonella, listeria, antibiotics in meat and the use of pesticides to grow food. Just over two out of 10 respondents said they had had foodborne illness in the past two years with most saying they believed it had been caused from food purchased outside the home. Just over three in 10 respondents said they had reported their foodborne illness.

While a majority of respondents were aware of the NZFSA, their knowledge of it was low.

NZFSA Communications and Business Services Director Sandra Daly says the results of the survey are interesting and will allow the NZFSA to better target the areas of need.

“There really hasn’t been this kind of information available so it will be a useful benchmark to work from,” she says.

Emergency Food Standard for Tahini

The New Zealand Food Safety Authority has introduced an Emergency Food Standard aimed at protecting consumers from imported tahini products that could be contaminated with Salmonella bacteria.

The move follows concern at the number of products containing tahini or crushed sesame seeds imported into New Zealand that have been found to be contaminated with Salmonella. The Emergency Food Standard means that all imported tahini, crushed sesame seeds or foods containing these products will be monitored and tested prior to being released when they arrive in the country.

In July hummus made with tahini was recalled by manufacturers because it was contaminated with Salmonella. In September the New Zealand Food Safety Authority issued three warnings to the public not to eat specific brands of tahini paste and halva, a Lebanese dried confectionery, because they contained Salmonella. These products have been linked to four cases of Salmonella in Auckland. Tahini has also been implicated in outbreaks of Salmonella in Australia and Sweden over the last two years.

"We need to be able to protect at the border from this sort of food contamination instead of waiting for people to get sick before we can deal with the problem. This new Emergency Food Standard will allow us to do that," Jim Wilson, Programme Manager, Imported Foods says.

Tahini is a sesame seed paste used in many Middle Eastern spreads and dips. It can be used by itself or as a flavour enhancer. It is also referred to as sesame paste, hamas tahini, tahina, tahine, halva dessert mix, sesame seed paste and sesame seed butter. Tahini is used in the manufacture of hummus (halawa), halva, and babaganoush.

"As a general food safety precaution, tahini should be kept in the fridge and consumed by its use-by date. Once the use-by date has expired it should be thrown out," Mr Wilson says.

Foodsafe Freddie - A star is born

This is Foodsafe Freddie as you have never seen him before. The mascot of the New Zealand Foodsafe Partnership has been given a life for this year's campaign. And what a life it is – he'll be appearing in television adverts, brochures, posters, colouring-in competitions, on fridge magnets and stickers. There is no limit to this mascot's talent.



The theme for this year's campaign is keeping food covered. Cover is part of the "Four Cs" from the Partnership's slogan "clean, cook, cover, chill". Covering food is a vital component of keeping food safe. It protects against cross-contamination

from other foods and contamination from flies and insects, especially outdoors.

Planning for the 2003/2004 Campaign is well underway with a number of events planned. Last year's launch in the grounds of Parliament was a fairly private affair. This year we have decided to find more public venues and details of that are still being finalised. Television celebrity chef Rick Rutledge Manning will be fronting a Wellington event during Foodsafe Week which starts on December 1. Another event is planned for Auckland's Civic Square during the week. Other activities are being planned throughout the country by members of the New Zealand Foodsafe Partnership.

The New Zealand Foodsafe Partnership is always looking for new partners with new ideas.

The campaign is run every year. If you or your company or organisation would like to be involved please contact Sarah Bromley at NZFSA – sarah.bromley@nzfsa.govt.nz or 04 463 2526.

New Wine Act to be implemented

A new Bill covering domestic and export standards for the wine industry is currently working its way through Parliament.

The Bill has passed through the select committee stage and will move onto its second and third readings in the House. If it passes successfully through the House, the Act is due to be enacted, as the Wine Act, on 1 January next year with a three year transition period to full implementation.

The Act will provide a one-stop-shop for winemakers and exporters providing them with the tools to assist them to comply with New Zealand's food safety, labelling and overseas

market access requirements. NZFSA's newly appointed Programme Manager for Wine, John Barker has the task of implementing the Wine Act. John says the Act will be of significant value to the wine industry.

"The NZFSA is committed to working closely with the industry to implement the Wine Act and ensuring that the legislative regime enhances the international success of New Zealand's wine industry," he says.

More information is available on our website: www.nzfsa.govt.nz/wine/



International connections shine through

International collaboration may see New Zealand companies play a part in helping the United States deal with its E. coli 0157 problem in cattle.

A recent trip to the United States by Dr Roger Cook, NZFSA Programme Manager (Microbiology) has highlighted the importance of international connections and collaboration in food safety developments.

Dr Cook attended the annual meeting of the International Association for Food Protection (IAFP) in New Orleans. He also met with US government microbiologists and food safety managers from the American Meat Institute and US meat companies.

The IAFP is the largest association of its kind with members from research institutes, industry and regulatory bodies. Dr Cook chairs the Management Committee for the IAFP's Journal of Food Protection. He is also a member of the IAFP's Foundation Fund Committee.

Dr Cook was one of five delegates from New Zealand, including two researchers from the Institute of Environmental Science and Research (ESR) and two from Fonterra Research.

"The conference was invaluable for NZFSA and ESR. It put us in touch with research projects on topics of importance to New Zealand. Such networking is paramount in ensuring that New Zealand science knowledge and directions are current."

"The discussions at the conference on E. coli 0157 were an important highlight for me, including information on new carcass microbiological decontamination procedures and other potentially pathogenic E. coli in sheep."

After the conference Dr Cook met with food safety experts from the Food Safety Inspection Service of the US Department of Agriculture. "The holistic approach of the NZFSA, from farm gate to consumers plate, was viewed very positively by our US



Dr Roger Cook.

counterparts. Some of the testing we are able to do here is not possible in the US because of the restrictions of the US legal system, and they looked with some envy on what we are able to do here in New Zealand."

Dr Cook then met with representatives of the US meat industry. He toured cattle feedlots and processing plants to learn firsthand about the systems and

challenges in the US industry. One of those challenges is E. coli 0157 in cattle.

E. coli 0157 is a common gut bug transferred to humans through untreated water, animal contact and undercooked meat products.

"They have a totally different system of rearing than New Zealand, and the current theory is that the E. coli 0157 problem is exacerbated in their intensive feedlot rearing systems.

"I saw feedlots with up to 150,000 cattle, and the hot climate and necessary spray cooling of the animals creates an ideal environment for bacteria growth on the hides. This then transfers to the carcass during processing. There aren't any easy solutions. Carcass decontamination systems may lessen the problem but certainly don't eliminate it."

Dr Cook says post-slaughter animal hide washes produced by New Zealand companies are one of the options being investigated by US meat companies to deal with the problem.

New Zealand rarely detects E. coli 0157 on cattle meat but the US situation impacts on NZ through trade requirements.

"It's important to maintain international collaborations and close personal networks to ensure that food safety surprises are not lurking just around the corner," he says.

Food labelling goes down a treat

Best-before and use-by dates are the most popular elements on food labels. That's the finding of a Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) survey.

The survey, carried out in metropolitan cities in Australia and New Zealand, found that consumers are reading and using information on food labels to make more informed choices about the food they eat. The survey was carried out just before the new Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code came into force in December 2002.

Two thirds of 1940 people surveyed used date marking, the ingredients list and the nutrition information panel on labels. Endorsements, such as the Heart Foundation's Pick the Tick and use-by and best-before dates were rated by consumers as the most clear and easy to understand. They were also rated as the most trustworthy.

New Zealanders reported higher awareness, and use for, the Nutrition Information Panels, ingredients list, advisory statements, warning statements, GMO declarations, preparation and storage instructions and novel food declarations. Australians reported a higher awareness of the nutrient claims and country of origin elements on food labels.

The least used labelling elements on food labels were health claims, allergen declarations, genetically modified food declaration and novel or irradiated food declarations.

The survey was conducted to provide information on consumer

Other key findings of the survey were:

- Consumers used an average of five label elements
- Genetically modified food declarations and country of origin labels were the least clear and easy to understand
- Most consumers do not have trouble reading and interpreting nutrition information panels but struggle to use this information to compare products
- Consumers focus on one nutrient only when comparing two products – fat
- Consumers misinterpreted nutrient claims
- Twenty five percent of people surveyed were aware that the ingredients list is presented in descending order of quantity
- Seventy-one percent of respondents correctly interpret the percentage ingredient labels (once they were aware of them)
- 'May contain nuts' allergen statements were not considered to be useful for allergen sufferers.

attitudes towards food labelling, awareness and use of different labelling elements, beliefs about the clarity and trustworthiness of labels and which parts of a label consumers found difficult to interpret.

Leading edge technology moves ahead



New Zealand's leading-edge E-cert system for Government to Government assurances for exports could soon be being used as the model around the world following an APEC meeting in September.

APEC members attending the meeting "Toward a cross-border paperless trading environment" in Chinese Taipei on September 2-4, accepted New Zealand's E-cert model and proposed that our standards be used as the international standards for electronic certification in sanitary and phytosanitary certificates.

It proposed that developed economies have an electronic export system in place by 2005 and developing economies by 2010 with those systems based upon the New Zealand model.

It also puts New Zealand in a unique position with being able to harmonise Customs and MAF/NZFSA data to address the US Government's new increased security requirements.

Ashley Mudford, NZFSA Programme Manager, E-cert, says this new major development could save New Zealand exporters millions of dollars.

"It means we don't have to reinvent the wheel. If the standards are adopted internationally then we lead the world with the management of electronic data for the MAF regime and it means we don't have to redevelop our system if someone comes up with a competing idea."

Mr Mudford presented the E-cert system jointly with his Australian counterpart to the 222 delegates at the meeting who represented all APEC economies.

APEC represents about 80% of the world's trade. New Zealand is leading the world in electronic certification with Australia following closely behind.

New Zealand developed a prototype in 1997 which was available for people to use in 1998.

It became mandatory for some areas in the meat sector in April 2000. Dairy had their system in production in August 2001 and phytosanitary in November 2002.

"The aim is that eventually all exported agricultural product that requires overseas assurance will go through E-cert.

"Somewhere between 50 percent to 80 percent of exports are agricultural," Mr Mudford says.

Meet our People: Rebecca McGill, Receptionist

Rebecca McGill defines herself as a people person, which is probably just as well since hers is the first face visitors to NZFSA see and the first voice callers to our 0800 number hear. Rebecca works on the 7th floor at NZFSA Head Office in Wellington as a receptionist. She receives visitors, answers the 0800 toll free line and deals with website inquiries.

And she certainly gets some interesting inquiries.

“I had one today from an elderly gentleman who asked what’s the difference between homogenised and silver topped milk and why is it that silver top hardly exists anymore.”

Then there’s the more usual stories of people getting sick from foodborne illness or finding some foreign object in the food they have eaten or are about to eat.

It’s a far cry from the heady days of working in Parliament in the late 1980s for then Minister of Sport and Recreation and Minister of External Relations and Trade, Mike Moore, who went on to become Prime Minister for a short time.

“I was with Ministerial Services for seven years in Mike Moore’s office as a Ministerial Officer. He was good to work with. His sense of humour was wicked and the staff that he had there were excellent. Mike was always someone that was quite jovial. He had loads of jokes and always talked about the bags under his eyes. When he went through Customs, the Customs officer would say ‘have we checked all the bags Sir’ and he would say ‘yes except for the bags under my eyes.’

“It was a whole different world in Parliament compared with the Department of Internal Affairs where I had worked. At the time I started there (in Parliament) I was about 18.”

Rebecca continued working for Mike Moore during his brief stint as Prime Minister in 1990. It was an interesting time. Mike Moore was the third Prime Minister appointed by the Labour Party during that year. The Labour Party then went on to lose the November election.

“I have a lot of respect for Mike. There was one time when we saw each other on the street about five years after I left



Parliament and he stopped to talk to me. When I had my three kids, he sent cards and gifts even though I wasn’t working there.”

Rebecca had a year off after the 1990 election, then returned to Parliament to work for Dr Lockwood Smith for a year.

While nothing can compare to working in Parliament, Rebecca says working at NZFSA is interesting and she enjoys it.

“I like making sure the organisation is running smoothly and people have got their visitors or making sure the visitors are being looked after. I am very much a people person. I like the contact with people. You can have the most grumpiest person come in but that doesn’t deter me at all. You just smile and them and say ‘yes you are absolutely right.’”

Rebecca has three children aged 11, six and four which take up a lot of her time outside work, but it’s another role she relishes.

Stop Press

The New Zealand Food Safety Authority is hosting three meetings for the food industry to discuss the Domestic Food Review. The first is to be held in Wellington, 6 November, 1pm to 4pm. The second will be held in Christchurch on November 24 (time to be advised) and the third will be held in Auckland on December 11, 10am to 1pm. Invitations and further details will be sent out to stakeholders shortly. If you would like to come but don’t receive an invitation please contact Dale Flavell at NZFSA on 04 463 2504 or dale.flavell@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