

Foodsafe Week launched in style

The first ever Foodsafe Week was launched in style in the grounds of Parliament on December 2. Wellington turned on a superb day for the Picnic at Parliament lunch-time barbecue attended by about 200 people, including children from the local Thorndon School.

Phil Vaughan kept the children (and adults) entertained with games and laughter while reinforcing the need to keep food safe with the four Cs message – clean, cook, cover, chill. Chef Father Des Britten fed guests with sausages from the barbecue.

Foodsafe Week was officially launched by Minister for Food Safety

Annette King. “Now that summer is with us (hopefully) and we’re all looking forward to Christmas parties, barbecues, outdoor living and family gatherings, the last thing any of us wants is for ourselves or for our friends or members of our families to come down with a food-borne illness. Foodsafe Week aims to remind us of the simple measures we can all take to prevent these illnesses from striking,” she said.

There’s no doubt that food-borne illness costs this country money – at least \$55 million according to research and that’s possibly just the tip of the iceberg.

‘Keep it Cool’ is the theme of this year’s Foodsafe Week. The week is organised by the New Zealand Foodsafe Partnership, a group of organisations with an interest in food safety, including NZFSA.

Food-borne illness is caused by bacteria which multiply very fast on food in moist, warm conditions. Summer is an especially hazardous time for food-borne illness but handling food properly can stop the bacteria from making people sick.

“There are approximately 119,000 cases of food-borne illness in New Zealand each year. About 40 percent of those cases are caused by incorrect food handling in the home,” NZFSA Executive Director and Foodsafe Partnership Chair Andrew McKenzie says.



IT'S COOL: Minister for Food Safety Hon Annette King and children from Thorndon School keep it cool at the launch of the first ever Foodsafe Week. Picture: Joanne Lynch.

“A couple of simple actions like washing your hands regularly and keeping food in the fridge can save people a lot of problems, not to mention a trip to the doctor or worse, hospital. The last thing people need this summer is to make their friends and family sick. Safe food handling practises are vital in the home.”

“Maintaining your fridge properly is also important. It should be kept at a temperature of between 0 and 4 degrees Celcius and the seals should be in good condition.”

Dr McKenzie says there is a perception that food-borne illness is

a minor tummy bug that causes a little discomfort and inconvenience. “While this is true for a majority of cases, food-borne illness can also lead to death and in the case of listeriosis, spontaneous abortion.”

“You can’t put a price on a loss of life, but research suggests that food-borne illness is costing New Zealand \$55 million a year in lost productivity, medical costs and other associated costs – that’s \$462 per sick person. Scientists believe that figure is conservative and could climb to as high as approximately \$90 million. That’s a waste of money when food-borne illness is so easy to avoid.”

So remember:

Clean hands before handling food. Wash knives and utensils and scrub chopping boards.

Cook chicken, meat patties and sausages thoroughly. Reheat leftovers till steaming hot.

Cover food. Store raw and cooked food separately.

Chill food. Use a chilly bin with a frozen chill pad to keep food safe when eating outdoors.

Have a great summer!

Quality Quote

Small cheer and great welcome makes a merry feast.

William Shakespeare

Food Standards for Christmas

It's almost here. No, not Christmas - the Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code.

After a several years of hard work the Food Standards Code will officially come into being on December 20 replacing most of New Zealand's food regulations.

The significance of the Food Code is that it brings New Zealand's food labelling and composition regulations into the 21st century. The food regulations it is replacing have been around since 1984, so they're generally old and outdated. With technology getting better all the time and consumer awareness increasing it's important that food regulations reflect these modern times.

NZFSA Director of Policy and Regulatory Standards (Labelling and Composition) Carole Inkster says she is delighted that the Food Standards Code is about to come into full effect.

"A lot of time and money has been invested in the Food Standards Code. It's the culmination of a lot of work by a lot of people within the New Zealand Food Safety Authority (NZFSA), Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ), the food industry and a number of other government departments.

I'm sure everyone is delighted that it is almost upon us."

The Food Standards Code will allow those in the food industry to be more flexible and innovative in their food product development and packaging design.

The trade relationship between Australia and New Zealand will be enhanced and it will strengthen our economic relationship.

"It will also be easier for countries exporting to our two countries as they will only be required to comply with one piece of legislation for product labelling and composition standards," Ms Inkster said.

Consumers will be rewarded through this legislation by comprehensive food labelling. "Consumers are demanding to know more about what's in the food they are eating and this Food Standards Code provides for that. It will assist consumers in making more informed decisions about the food they are eating. Food manufacturers will be required to list on their labels common food allergens so people who do have reactions to certain foods will be able to tell if that product is in the food item they want to buy."

Food safety standards and hygiene regulations will continue to be set by the NZFSA.

E-cert gets thumbs up

New Zealand's electronic certification system E-cert has been accepted as the model for use by countries belonging to APEC.

E-cert, a health certificate system used to clear the export and import of food and other animal products, was adopted by Ministers at the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation Joint Ministerial Meeting in Los Cabos, Mexico recently.

Minister for Food Safety Annette King and Minister of Trade Negotiations Jim Sutton announced this great achievement last month and said the acceptance internationally of a New Zealand-based web system was a shining example of the innovation this country is known for.

"There's no doubt that we are leading the way in this regard. The beauty of this system is its simplicity and the acceptance of our system in this way is a credit to those that have worked on it," Mrs King said.

E-cert provides a robust way of passing on a government to government assurance that the New Zealand products meet the importing government's requirements in terms of food safety. It is also faster and cheaper than other electronic systems.

E-cert reduces the cost of compliance and reduces fraud. It gives

New Zealand a competitive edge because we are one of a few countries in the world that can clearly show what has happened to an exported product from the time the animal or plant enters a factory for processing in New Zealand until the time it gets to the importing country.

It also provides a level of security to the importing country.

New Zealand and Australia have worked together on streamlining export documentation systems but the web-based concept came from New Zealand and in the end it's New Zealand's system that has been accepted by APEC.

New Zealand began using the system in 1998 for meat transfers within New Zealand. Export certificates through E-cert to Canada started in June 2001, and the USA, Mexico and the Czech Republic (for wool only) began this year. Other countries are scheduled to join before the end of the year. A 'world first' pilot is also underway with the Netherlands for electronic transfer of certificates.

The United States is moving towards linking its import authority's computers to the New Zealand certification system, which provides a chance for the United States to clear the food products before they even leave New Zealand.



Season's Greetings

The New Zealand Food Safety Authority would like to wish you and your family a safe and happy holiday season. Our Wellington Head Office will be closed from December 24 through to January 6. However our main switchboard will still be operating and will have emergency contact numbers.

Total Diet Survey unveiled

Consumer groups have been presented with their first glimpse of a proposed list of foods to be tested as part of the New Zealand Total Diet Survey being undertaken by the New Zealand Food Safety Authority in 2003/2004.

The Total Diet Survey is carried out every five to six years. It assesses the health implications of, and estimates the potential dietary exposure to, selected pesticides, contaminants and nutrient elements in the New Zealand food supply. The previous surveys have been done by the Ministry of Health. The proposed list was presented to a regular meeting of the Consumers' Forum on Food Safety in Wellington last month.

The proposed list of foods contains 110 commonly eaten foods, three foods that are considered high risk (lamb's liver, mussels and oysters) and eight foods consumed specifically by children or infants.

"The foods selected are intended to represent the average and typical intakes of New Zealanders, NZFSA Executive Director Dr Andrew McKenzie said.

"It's interesting to note the foods that are popular now compared to the last survey in 1997/98. Research indicates that muffins and scones, cream, flavoured milk and salad dressing are now popular food items and cornbeef is as popular as other types of meat included in the list. Ham is more popular than luncheon sausage in sandwiches and avocado is becoming an increasingly popular

food item," Dr McKenzie said.

"Having representatives from consumer groups look at the proposed list will allow us to determine whether we are on the right track," Dr McKenzie said.

"The list of pesticides, and contaminants and nutrient elements that the foods will be tested for is still to be drawn up and a meeting will be held with interested parties to determine that. Consumer groups have been invited to attend that meeting and to provide input into what the survey will cover," Dr McKenzie said.

In addition funding will be made available to research areas of concern to consumers. National Consumers Food Safety Network spokesperson Meriel Watts, who attended the meeting, said it was the first time a government department had made funding available specifically for that purpose. "We are very pleased to be able to provide input into such an important survey," she said.

It is expected that feedback on the progress of the survey will be released regularly throughout the survey period with a final report expected in 2005. The findings of the survey will also contribute to the World Health Organisation (WHO) Global Environmental Monitoring System Food Programme and enable accurate international comparisons.



Food additives made easy

Reading food labels has just got a whole lot easier with the production of 'Identifying Food Additives' a free pocket-size booklet on food additives.

The booklet, which was previously published by the Ministry of Health, is now being produced by the New Zealand Food Safety Authority.

The booklet lists colours, preservatives, acidity regulators, antioxidants, emulsifiers, stabilisers, thickeners, gelling agents, anticaking agents, humectants, raising agents, firming agents, foaming agents, flavour enhancers, glazing agents, propellants, sweeteners, bulking agents, enzymes, antifoaming agents, and other miscellaneous additives. The food additives are listed numerically according to their function and the book gives an explanation of why they are used.

"The information in the booklet will help people understand what's in the food they are eating and just why additives are required. People are becoming more interested in knowing what's



in the food they eat. Numbers don't mean a thing to a lot of people, but this booklet can tell consumers just what those numbers mean," NZFSA Director of Policy and Regulatory Standards Carole Inkster says.

The booklets are available from Mariana van Niekerk at mariana.vanniekerk@nzfsa.govt.nz or 04 463 2673.

On the button for nutritional information

Chocolate bar or health bar? Sometimes it's a difficult choice. Now thanks to an online food composition database, the choice might just have got easier.

The New Zealand Food Safety Authority, in partnership with Crop & Food Research, has developed a free database listing the nutrient values of more than 2470 foods.

Manufacturers are required to include Nutrition Information Panels on most packaged foods from December 20, when the Joint Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code comes into full effect. The database will assist manufacturers to do that.

The amounts of each of seven key food components are listed for each product on the database. Those seven components are energy (kilojoules), protein, fat, saturated fat, carbohydrates, total sugars and sodium. The energy values include the energy gained from dietary fibre and are different from other existing food composition databases.

NZFSA Director of Policy and Regulatory Standards (Labelling and Composition) Carole Inkster says the new service will be an invaluable tool for manufacturers.

"The information is very easy to access and can be used as it is or in conjunction with the manufacturers' systems to calculate the Nutrition Information Panel for each product."

"Manufacturers, we know, are getting ready for the introduction of the Joint Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code on December 20. This is another tool to assist them in complying with the law," Ms Inkster said.

"While this database is targeted at manufacturers, consumers will benefit from the Nutrition Information Panels. They will be able to see at a glance exactly what's in the food they are eating," Ms Inkster said.

The database is available on Crop & Food Research's website www.crop.cri.nz.

It won't happen overnight ...

Are you involved in the domestic food sector? Want to know what changes are happening? The answer is simple - nothing just yet.

The domestic food regulatory framework is an area being looked at by the New Zealand Food Safety Authority. But it's unlikely that you'll notice any requirement to change the way you do things just yet. The process will take about three years to complete.

The hygiene regulations that apply to most food businesses are outdated and the means of ensuring they are being applied are full of inconsistencies.

We need to introduce new relevant systems. But there are many steps in the process before we reach the final destination.

The first thing we have to do is consult with stakeholders and agree on what it is we want and how we might achieve.

That consultation will be done over the next six to 12 months.

However we can tell you that the new measures will be risk based using Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point (HACCP) principles. They will be as simple as we can make them to ensure costs to industry are minimised and that the measures are not seen as onerous.

Out of the 30,000 domestic food businesses, only 500 currently have risk based management plans. It's anticipated that in time all food producers will operate under risk-based management programmes that are appropriate to their businesses.

Of course we will involve the industry in the development and introduction of new systems. We want to move forward in a way that is inclusive of everyone and we look forward to working with you all.

2003 conference shaping up

Building and Maintaining Confidence in New Zealand Food. That's the theme for the NZFSA's conference in Auckland on 25 and 26 March, 2003.

The programme is coming together nicely. Minister for Food Safety Annette King will formally open the conference talking about consumers and New Zealand's reputation as a trusted supplier of food.

Tradenz CEO Fran Wilde will share her views on trade in a demanding world and Sue Dibb, from the National Consumer Council in the UK will talk about meeting consumers' expectations.

What's happening on the local scene will be handled by NZFSA Executive Director Andrew McKenzie, Local Government Association CEO Peter Winder, and Dick Hubbard of Hubbards Foods. We will hold workshops on food safety, labelling, dairy,

animal products and agricultural compounds and veterinary medicines (ACVM).

Peta Mathias will entertain after dinner on the first day.

On the second day, we will look at food in trade and managing risks in food with a number of interesting speakers from New Zealand and abroad. There will be a discussion on the strategic review of New Zealand's domestic food safety programme and a look at the implications of more stringent measures internationally in response to new threats. We'll also look at how NZFSA can best engage and consult with the many groups involved in food safety.

The inaugural conference of the New Zealand Food Safety Authority is going to be interesting, exciting and entertaining. Registrations are being taken now. Forms are available on our website www.nzfsa.govt.nz

BSE-free status confirmed

New Zealand cattle are free of Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE).

The EU Scientific Steering Committee (SSC) has reconfirmed New Zealand's BSE-free status saying it is highly unlikely that domestic cattle in New Zealand are infected with the BSE agent. It gave New Zealand a Category 1 status (GBR I) – the highest achievable category representing the lowest risk.

BSE is one of a group of brain wasting diseases that occurs in adult cattle. It was first identified in Britain in 1986.

The SSC provides an opinion based on the geographical risk of BSE and the likelihood of the presence of one or more cattle being infected with BSE. New Zealand's BSE status was last examined in 2000. The result of that was also Category 1.

“Due to the fact that only negligible BSE infectivity entered the country, there was no risk that BSE infectivity was recycled or propagated. It is therefore concluded that it is highly unlikely that domestic cattle are (clinically or pre-clinically) infected with the BSE-agent (GBR-I),” the latest report says.

NZFSA Executive Director Dr Andrew McKenzie said he was

pleased with the result. “There are a lot of people working extremely hard within NZFSA, MAF and other agencies to ensure that New Zealand retains its BSE-free status and its thanks to their hard work that we keep that status. The importance to our meat export industry of maintaining this Category 1 status is immense.”

The report says that as long as no “external challenges” occur, the GBR status will remain low. It says while BSE infectivity, if imported, could have reached domestic cattle, very few cattle and no meat and bonemeal have been imported to New Zealand from BSE risk countries.

Dr McKenzie said he was confident that the systems in place now to keep BSE out of New Zealand were of a very high standard and would allow New Zealand to retain its Category 1 status.

“Our surveillance for BSE has been increased and government agencies and industry are constantly reviewing and improving the measures we have in place to ensure they are of the highest standard. This favourable report from the EU endorses the work being done here.”

Bon voyage Mirzet Sabirovic

New Zealand's Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) monitoring programme is in good shape and remains right up to play with international standards.

That's the verdict of Mirzet Sabirovic, Programme Manager (Monitoring and Review) with the Animal Products group who leaves NZFSA this month on a 12 month leave of absence.

Mirzet, has been working on the BSE monitoring programme since 2000 when a major review of New Zealand's BSE monitoring system was done. He believes he's leaving the programme in good health.

“All the work that has been done for the past two years has ensured New Zealand remains recognised as a country free from BSE. I believe the programme is designed to suit New Zealand conditions. I am very confident that all groups involved feel a strong ownership of the programme and that's the major strength of the system we have in place. It's the commitment of all parties to strive towards systems based on sound science and risk management that enable New Zealand to remain at the forefront of trade.

“No system is perfect but this system is designed to accommodate changing needs and ongoing demands in an appropriate manner. As with anything else if people stand behind the system, the system will deliver for New Zealand needs. Its important to work together because this is a classic example of teamwork,” he says.

Mirzet, who made New Zealand his home after leaving Bosnia in the 1990's says he likes the way things are done in New Zealand.



“I have always admired the way New Zealand has done things. In my professional career I have travelled quite a lot and I have seen the way other countries have done business and although everybody tries to do their best I think New Zealand has a unique way of achieving the objectives and goals. Everything we do, we do well.”

Mirzet is going to the UK, where his parents live. But it's not a permanent departure, he says, and he plans to be back in about a year.

“My primary reason (for returning) is to look after family business because I believe it is probably the right time to address several issues. Given the distance it is quite impossible to sort out these issues from New Zealand.

“I don't consider this as a goodbye but as with any other person who goes away for an extended period of time, I have been reflecting on the time I have spent here and I realise how privileged I have been to work with such a diverse and interesting group of people who have the skills, knowledge and professionalism.”

Meet our people: Cherie Flynn, Senior Policy Analyst, Policy Group

Cherie Flynn has been at the forefront of a number of controversial New Zealand issues. As a policy analyst she worked on the Smokefree Environments Act. She was also there during the initial stages of the Hepatitis C Inquiry and worked on the Needle and Syringe Exchange Scheme and the Food Act. And for the past four years, since she joined MAF Food (now NZFSA) in 1998, she has been working on the Animal Products Act. But it's work she loves.

"I still get a tremendous sense of pride and achievement and I still get a kick when I go down to Parliament and the Minister is speaking the words that I wrote. You are making a difference when you are changing the law of your country and I do feel very passionately about the importance of public health and am very conscious of the fact that I am a public servant serving the people of New Zealand," she says.

The first piece of food-related legislation Cherie worked on was the amendments to the Food Act in 1996. She was also involved with the establishment of the Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code. "I find it (food legislation) fascinating, I always have. That's why I have stayed generally working in food policy for over 10 years. It is interesting and its usually different. There is always something new and interesting coming along."

Cherie is currently working on the next Total Diet Survey and is involved with the Codex Committee attending various meetings around the world.

"It sounds glamorous but one meeting room is very much like another meeting room. It doesn't matter where in the world you are."



Cherie Flynn.

But it's a far cry from her days as a young wife and mother of three children.

"On my 21st birthday I had been married two and a bit years, I had a one-year-old son and another on the way. It was then I decided I wasn't cut out just to stay at home with the kids so I started doing university work by correspondence and then gradually moved to part-time study."

She did her degree on and off over approximately nine years, during which time she had another child – a daughter.

It was during the time of the transition period between free university education and fee-paying education. "I did my first two papers at Massey in 1980. It cost me \$19 to do two papers. When I did my last two papers in 1990 it cost me \$540 plus \$400 in text books."

It is her life experiences and those of her family and friends that give her a more rounded analysis base, she says.

"I am a taxpayer, a parent and a member of New Zealand society. The things I do affect me as much as they affect my friends and people's livelihoods. I was always very conscious when we were working on the Animal Products Act that my husband and sons are recreational hunters. You bring that perspective with you."

Cherie has two adored Labrador Retrievers and does quilting. Two of her quilts were recently accepted for an international exhibition in the United States. They are now on display in Wellington.

PMAC launched

New Zealand's horticultural and arable industries entered a new era last month with the launch of a strategic partnership between industry and NZFSA / MAF Biosecurity, to focus on plants market access issues.

The Plants Market Access Council (PMAC) is New Zealand's first cross-industry forum for all horticultural and arable sectors. It represents many plant industries, including plant food products, and will address phytosanitary (plant health), food safety and truth of labelling issues.

PMAC, which was launched by the Minister of Agriculture, the Hon Jim Sutton, is the new vehicle for industry and government to work together on plant product market access issues including:

- Establishing and monitoring a co-ordinated and sustainable strategy for market access and official assurances.
- Providing a forum for proactive co-operation between Industry,

the NZFSA and MAF to ensure that market access is achievable and cost-effective with sustainable resources.

- Providing leadership, co-ordination and cohesion for the horticultural and arable industries by maximising the value of the Industry/NZFSA /MAF partnership.

A website will keep PMAC's members and other interested parties up to date with its work and provide a vehicle for feedback. The website is due to go live later this month - check it out soon at: www.pmac.co.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.