

# International Heads of Food Agencies Forum Meeting

4th International Meeting  
10 May 2023, Ireland

IHFAF

INTERNATIONAL HEADS OF FOOD  
AGENCIES FORUM



Údarás Sábháilteachta Bia NA hÉIREANN  
Food Safety AUTHORITY OF IRELAND



## Meeting Theme:

**Crisis preparedness and incident management in an increasingly complex global food system**





# Participating Countries/Organisations



## Australia

Food Standards Australia New Zealand



## Belgium

Federal Agency for the Safety of the Food Chain(FASFC)



## Chile

Chilean Food Safety and Quality Agency, ACHIPIA



## China

China National Center for food safety risk assessment



## Denmark

The Danish Veterinary and Food Administration



## Egypt

Egyptian National Food Safety Authority



## France

ANSES (French Agency for food, environmental and occupational health & safety)



## Germany

Federal Office of Consumer Protection and Food Safety (BVL)  
German Federal Institute for Risk Assessment (BFR)



## Ireland

Food Safety Authority of Ireland



**Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations**



## Kuwait

Public Authority for Food and Nutrition in Kuwait



## Morocco

Office National de Sécurité Sanitaire des Produits Alimentaires



## Nederland

Netherlands Food and Consumer Product Safety Authority (NVWA)



## New Zealand

New Zealand Food Safety



## Codex Alimentarius Commission



## Portugal

Autoridade de Segurança Alimentar e Económica (ASAE)



## Saudi Arabia

Saudi Food & Drug Authority



## Scotland

Food Standards Scotland



## Singapore

Singapore Food Agency



## World Health Organization



## United Kingdom

Food Standards Agency

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# Introduction



In recent years, the world has experienced new and emerging risks, including those resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and speaking in Dublin on the 10 May, the International Heads of Food Agencies Forum stressed the importance of ongoing worldwide engagement to understand and address these challenges and strengthen global food safety systems.

The 4th International Heads of Food Agencies Forum meeting saw seventeen regulatory agencies gather together to discuss how best to prepare for food safety crises and manage food safety incidents in what is becoming an increasingly complex global food system. The Forum was also joined by senior officials from the World Health Organization, the Food and Agriculture Organization and the Codex Alimentarius Commission.

Sessions included sharing information on the systems in place in a number of countries for identifying risks and threats, and a reflection on lessons learned from some of the world's major food safety/ food fraud incidents and an exploration of best practices and common pitfalls to avoid.

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**The International Heads of Food Agencies Forum emphasises the need for continued collaboration and knowledge sharing among international food safety agencies to learn from each other and improve our collective response to future food safety crises.**

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By working together, the international community can strengthen global food safety systems and ultimately better protect the health and well-being of consumers worldwide.

Founded in 2020 by the Saudi Food and Drug Authority, the Food Safety Authority of Ireland and Food Standards Australia New Zealand, the Forum is focused on ensuring food regulators worldwide are equipped to adapt to the fast pace of change in consumer behaviour, in food production practices, in technologies and in environmental conditions impacting food safety and quality, and also ensuring that their decisions and current food regulatory measures continue to support consumer protection.





# Opening Session

Dr Pamela Byrne, Chief Executive, Food Safety Authority of Ireland

At the opening of the IHFAF Meeting, Dr Pamela Byrne, Chief Executive, Food Safety Authority of Ireland, welcomed all participants to Dublin and encouraged engagement on what would turn out to be a very fruitful topic. She emphasised the strength and clarity that comes from collective unity in the face of food safety crises. She also mentioned the role the IHFAF provides in building global networks for food safety, facilitating learnings from other countries, and sharing expertise and experience in ensuring swift and effective responses to any potential emerging risks and threats to the global food chain.

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**Dr Byrne commended all countries and organisations in their involvement in the forum with the aim of ultimately strengthening global food safety systems.**

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Following this, Minister Hildegard Naughton, Minister of State with responsibility for Public Health, Well Being and the National Drugs Strategy in Ireland, welcomed participants on behalf of the Irish government and spoke about how she hoped the event would provide further opportunities to ensure safe food by protecting the health and wellbeing of all consumers.

Prior to chairing Session 1 of the meeting, Dr Byrne asked members to consider the following questions regarding the future of the IHFAF:

1. What is the value of the forum?
2. What is the future of the forum / strategy for the future?
3. What topics are of interest to members?
4. Are there countries who would like to host the 2024 and 2025 meetings?



# Session 1:



## Session Chair:

Dr Pamela Byrne, Chief Executive, Food Safety Authority of Ireland

# Systems for identifying emerging risks and threats

The session recognised that an essential step in the better management of crises and incidents is the ability to anticipate possible problems to reduce the number of occasions where your organisation is 'blindsided'. It placed emphasis on systems that identify and share information on emerging risks and threats and underlined how fundamental they are to a proactive risk management approach. The session examined emerging risks and threats systems that exist or are in development and drew a view on their utility, pros and cons and role in crisis/incident preparedness.



This session opened with an overview of the emerging risk systems in Ireland and the existent link to EU member States through EFSA, by Dr. Wayne Anderson, Director of Food Science and Standards, Food Safety Authority of Ireland.



Next Dr. Sandra Cuthbert Chief Executive, Food Standards Australia New Zealand outlined the Australian Vigilance and Intelligence Before food issues Emerge (VIBE) System.



Dr. Markus Lipp, Senior Food Safety Officer, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations explained the foresight programme and early warning systems currently in place in the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.



The session drew to a close with an Introduction to the Food Industry Intelligence Network system by Mr. Paul Dobson, Quality, Safety & Environment Director at Premier Foods PLC and a Governing Director of FIIN, FIIN Technical Group.



# Session 1

## Emerging risk systems in Ireland and link to EU member States through European Food Safety Authority (EFSA)



Dr Wayne Anderson,  
Director of Food Science and  
Standards, Food Safety  
Authority of Ireland

### Overview

Dr Wayne Anderson provided an overview of the FSAI's emerging risks system. He outlined that Ireland uses EFSA's definitions of emerging risks. Emerging risks are affected by drivers e.g., climate change, which result in signals e.g., aflatoxin identification in a new area, that are early warnings of risks e.g., increasing mycotoxin contamination of the food chain. In Ireland information is exchanged on emerging risks in various ways – with industry through the Emerging Risks & Threats Forum (ERFT), with the FSAI Scientific Committee and professional networks, with official agencies, and with EU member states through EFSA's Emerging Risks Exchange Network (EREN). The FSAI has a developing emerging risk system that addresses many horizons from identification of immediate issues to identification of long-term emerging risks.

Different systems are better for different purposes. For example, social media monitoring seems better suited for warning of imminent risks whereas literature screening systems are better utilized for longer term emerging risk signals. The signals that the FSAI collects are filtered through an internal multidisciplinary expert group that decides on appropriate actions and the status of the emerging risk. In turn the FSAI informs and receives information from networks of scientists, enforcement practitioners, the food industry and EFSA. EFSA has a key role in emerging risk identification for Europe and a mature system for evaluating emerging risk signals which involves member state experts, industry experts and their own staff. The FSAI is part of the EFSA network and shares signals with member states gaining further perspectives on each emerging risk issue.

### Conclusions

- Countries should define what is meant by emerging risks and be aware of the different time horizons involved.
- Emerging risk signal identification systems should be evaluated for their ability to identify issues on different time horizons.
- All signals should be filtered through expert groups with multidisciplinary backgrounds so their status as emerging risks can be established, and the correct action taken.
- Sharing emerging risk signals between countries is important and all interactions should be two ways; both giving and receiving information.
- Countries should involve the food industry and facilitate open sharing of information by creating 'safe spaces'.



# Session 1

## Australian Vigilance and Intelligence Before food issues Emerge (VIBE) System



Dr Sandra Cuthbert, Chief Executive, Food Standards Australia New Zealand

### Overview

Dr Sandra Cuthbert provided an overview of Vigilance & Intelligence Before food issues Emerge (VIBE). Sandra outlined the FSANZ vision “World-leading standards, safe food for life” and their key activities which include developing scientific evidence-based food standards, coordinating regulatory responses across the food regulation system (e.g. food incident responses and recalls) and providing information to food regulators and consumers. Dr Cuthbert outlined the various drivers of change in the food industry such as globalisation and the complexity of food production, modernisation and the need for more focus on ‘intelligence’, and increased expectations from consumers so food safety regulators need to be agile and responsive. VIBE looks at intelligence, people and data, and other sources of information; it has a wide intelligence net and believes it is important to get the balance right between science/data and expert opinion/judgement. Sandra provided information on how the VIBE works. She also explained the intelligence web which is currently available to FSANZ.

Sandra described a case study on backyard chicken eggs, and how a lead from an enquiry-based intelligence source helped the case which meant these were added to VIBE register in February 2022. In March 2022, FSANZ published consumer information through Food Standards News around the lead in backyard soil and home-grown produce. A second case study on *Listeria monocytogenes* in Enoki mushrooms was presented. This arose due to recalls activities in the USA, this was added to the VIBE Register in March 2022. FSANZ are currently undertaking an analytical survey to generate baseline data in the event of an outbreak. What’s on the horizon for the VIBE? Rise of the machines - role of AI; scenario planning; joining the intelligence dots and enhanced stakeholder forecasting including 2, 5, and 10 year planning.

### Conclusions

- Countries could benefit from adopting VIBE principles that contributes to scenario planning, and intentionally distinguish between the visionary, trending, emerged and established risks on the horizon.
- Food safety authorities should consider developing a system that provide an additional layer of surveillance and help to ensure that potential food safety issues are detected and addressed quickly and effectively.
- Food safety authorities should consider using automated tools for data analysis to improve the efficiency of the surveillance system. This will enable authorities to respond to potential food safety issues more quickly and reduce the need for manual intervention.
- Food safety authorities should adopt a risk-based approach to emerging risk assessment to ensure that resources are allocated appropriately, and the highest-risk issues are addressed first.



# Session 1

## FAO foresight programme and early warning systems



Dr Markus Lipp, Senior Food Safety Officer, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)

### Overview

Dr Markus Lipp described how global agrifood systems operate within a constantly evolving landscape – globalization, climate change and need for sustainability, population increase, urbanization, new food consumption patterns, new technologies and scientific progress. He outlined the importance of the ability to anticipate problems in food safety. Foresight looks at the bigger picture and can help us to understand how new trends, changes or knowledge gaps can affect the agrifood system and food safety.

FAO's foresight process includes collecting multiple sources of information, analysing and interpreting the information and then communicating the results.

Policy recommendations and future work can then be decided. Markus explained how collaboration with others is important to the success of emerging risk and threat systems.

### Conclusions

Foresight plays an important role in identifying emerging food safety challenges and opportunities that will continue to arise as the global context evolves with ongoing transformation of the agrifood systems.

Foresight can help bridge science and policy by informing a range of food chain-related decisions.

- The FAO is well-placed to collect, analyse, and disseminate information on various emerging issues from numerous fronts, while also providing support to countries in implementing their own foresight activities.
- Effective foresight approaches rely on information gathered from a wide range of sources and this endeavour will not be possible without collaborations with our various partners, both in-house and outside.



# Session 1

## An Introduction to the Food Industry Intelligence Network (FIIN)



Mr Paul Dobson, Quality, Safety & Environment Director at Premier Foods PLC and a Governing Director of FIIN, FIIN Technical Group

### Overview

Mr Paul Dobson explained the role of the Food Industry Intelligence Network (FIIN). FIIN is a voluntary system consisting of manufacturing, retail and food service members who share data on integrity testing of the food chain through a third party 'safe space'. He explained how the objective is to ensure the integrity of food supply chains and protect the interests of the consumer, and to address the recommendations from "The Elliott Report" for industry to establish a 'safe haven' to collect, collate, analyse and disseminate information and intelligence. FIIN Technical Group aims to work with governmental bodies to better understand where risks may sit in the UK food industry from food fraud. In addition, it hopes to help disrupt those activities and in doing so, further enhance the reputation of the (UK) Food Industry.

### Conclusions

- Industry needs to share information between each other in order to protect the integrity of the food chain.



# Session 1: Discussions



Data is essential for food agencies to make sound decisions. It is a critical element to decision making and future planning. But there can be challenges to sharing data. This must be resolved, otherwise, we run the risk of missing emerging risks and issues. Data sharing is essential but it has to be in a useable form and it is also important to avoid data overload. Filtering through a human group is important – requires judgement and experience.



There is merit in having multiple information / intelligence sources to monitor emerging risks and opportunities. AI has endless capabilities and a role to play, but it is early days and should be treated with caution.



It would be ideal if industry shared data on emerging risks and also on food safety with regulators on a voluntary basis.



Collaboration is essential. The “people factor” is also important – trained staff; connecting with consumers and what they want. The Eurobarometer Survey gives an insight into consumer sentiment.



Regulators must be agile and responsive to change.



During a crisis, each country/organisation goes into the same response mode. How can this effort be pulled together?



There is value in the forum in sharing learnings, good practice, wisdom and information. This group can set the tone for future discussions. BfR Germany has a [document on their national emerging risk system](#), and they shared this with the group following the meeting.



## Session 2:



### Session Chair:

Ms. Emily Miles, Chief Executive Officer, Food Standards Agency, United Kingdom

# Crisis Preparedness – lessons learned from previous crises and planning

There is a lot to learn from understanding how food safety/fraud crises developed and how they were tackled from those who lived through them. This session afforded an opportunity for lessons to be shared. Lessons learned can be helpful for everyone and can lead to improved responses in the future. This session focussed on some of the world's major food safety or food fraud incidents with a view to identifying good practices to follow, and pitfalls to avoid.



The session opened with an overview of the EU histamine in tuna food fraud crisis by Mr. Eric Marin, Deputy Head of unit, Food Hygiene and Fraud, European Commission.



Dr. Tan Lee Kim, Director-General & Deputy Chief Executive Officer, Singapore Food Agency explained the important of food supply chain resilience in Singapore and how they mitigated chicken supply disruption in 2022.



Next Mr. Vincent Arbuckle, Deputy Director-General, New Zealand Food Safety outlined New Zealand's Whey Protein Concentrate Contamination Incident and its long-term impacts.



The session closed with a presentation by Dr. Lucia Anelich, Anelich Consulting which focused on the South African *Listeria monocytogenes* crisis (2017-2018).



# Session 2

## The EU histamine in tuna food fraud crisis



Mr Eric Marin, Deputy Head of unit – Food Hygiene and Fraud, European Commission

### Overview

Mr Marin provided an overview about the EU tuna food fraud crisis. Eric outlined tuna's normal ageing process and the illegal treatment used, in this instance, it was to sell frozen Tuna fresh instead of canned. The treatment contains 3 main violations of EU Food Law. There was an intentional use of Nitrites (and other additives) to enhance tuna's colour. Industry were warned several times by the European Commission and Member States to stop this practice. According to the Industry, approximately 25,000 tons of Tuna underwent this treatment in 2016. The consequences of this practice include poor quality tuna being bought as high quality, an increased risk of high level of histamine and nitrites may lead to formation of nitrosamines (carcinogenic).

Now, there is more attention being paid to food fraud and there is an awareness of its potential to hurt consumers and brands. There are more tools and technologies available to detect and deter food fraud.

### Conclusions

- We must learn from previous incidents and develop measures by strengthening the regulations and controls on imported food to prevent incidents from happening in the future.
- The European Union implemented several measures to prevent similar incidents from happening in the future.



# Session 2

## Food supply chain resilience in Singapore - mitigating chicken supply disruption



Dr Tan Lee Kim, Director-General & Deputy Chief Executive Officer, Singapore Food Agency

### Overview

Dr Tan Lee Kim provided an overview of the strategies to ensure and secure a supply of safe food for Singapore, namely grow local, diversify import sources, and grow overseas.

Even as Singapore's chicken supply comes from several sources, Malaysia is the 2nd largest source of chicken (34% of chicken supply) given local consumers' preference for imported live chickens that were locally slaughtered in Singapore and retailed as chilled chicken. Therefore, a third of Singapore's chicken supply was affected by Malaysia's export restriction on live chicken that took place in June 2022.

To ensure that there was adequate chicken supply while ensuring food safety during the export restriction, SFA engaged and mobilised the industry across the food supply chain to ramp up supply and sale of chicken from alternate sources, removed regulatory hurdles to support businesses and expedited the accreditation of a new source of chicken. SFA also embarked on public communication to get consumers buy-in on the need to diversify and to be flexible and adaptable by switching to substitutes.

Singapore saw no actual chicken supply shortage on the ground. There was just no locally slaughtered chilled chicken for about two weeks. There were also several positive outcomes from this export ban, such as:

- Securing an adequate supply of chicken efficiently and effectively through alternative sources;
- Enhancing diversification strategies and strengthening industry resiliency;
- Strengthening consumers' food resilience and preventing panic buying;
- Fostering stronger local and international collaboration across divisions, agencies, industry and competent authorities.

### Conclusions

- Diversifying food sources helps to mitigate supply disruption.
- During a food supply incident, managing the level of supply as well as consumer demand are both important.
- Ensuring food supply requires a joint responsibility among government, industry & consumers.

# Session 2

## New Zealand's Whey Protein Concentrate Contamination Incident – its long-term impacts



Mr Vincent Arbuckle, Deputy Director-General, New Zealand Food Safety

### Overview

Mr Arbuckle outlined New Zealand's Whey Protein Concentrate Contamination Incident and its long-term impacts. Fonterra is the largest dairy producer in the Southern Hemisphere, New Zealand's largest company, and the sixth largest dairy company among global dairy producers. The Incident took place in 2012 when there was a suspected contamination of whey protein concentrate (WPC) with *Clostridium botulinum*. On 3 August 2013, Ministry publicly announces that a batch of WPC80 may be contaminated.

New Zealand Food Safety's initial response involved confronting the immediate public health, trade, market access, tracing, infant formula supply, media and political concerns. They took precautions and considered the risks, issuing media releases and Director-General statements on possible contaminated products, advising trade partners, and working with industry on tracing and recalls. The ministry undertook an in-depth risk assessment as technical and chronological information was received from Fonterra.

### Conclusions

- The first 48 hours are crucial to a successful response as important decisions are made and public opinions are often formed during this time.
- It is important to prioritize communication, coordination, and risk assessment in the early stages of a crisis to ensure a successful response.
- Don't underestimate how essential the accuracy and appropriateness of initial analytical tests, interpretation and associated risk assessment are; and the importance of effective coordination between government and industry on early communications and actions.
- Risk assessments should be conducted promptly and accurately to determine the level of risk associated with the problem. This will help in making informed decisions and taking appropriate actions to mitigate the risk.
- Effective coordination between government and industry is crucial, especially in terms of early communications and actions. This will help in managing the situation effectively and prevent public panic.



# Session 2

## The South African *Listeria monocytogenes* crisis



Dr Lucia Anelich, Anelich Consulting

### Overview

Dr Anelich provided an overview about the listeriosis outbreak that happened in 2017-2018 in South Africa. It was the largest documented listeriosis outbreak in history. She also provided an outline about the economic impact of the outbreak as well as information on the changes the outbreak brought about.

The following gaps were highlighted: fragmented food control system; no regulations in place for *L. monocytogenes* in RTE foods; no monitoring of foods for safety, lack of risk communication expertise and a lack of coordinated and factual communication with industry, consumers & between national departments. The disadvantages of this crisis included; increased food waste, lack of regulation by Dept Health; no monitoring, funding cut to NICD (Enteric Diseases), "Brain drain", no further focus on food safety and unnecessary "hype" on *L. monocytogenes*, not based on risk.

The benefits that emerged following the crisis were Listeriosis becoming a notifiable disease, HACCP becoming required by law for processed meats, SANS 885 being put in place and made mandatory, WGS introduced in public health lab, a clear message to the food industry on the importance of maintaining food safety and the costs when this is not maintained.

### Conclusions

- It is important to strengthen food safety regulations and ensure that they are being enforced effectively.
- It is essential to be transparent and to communicate clearly between government agencies, food producers and consumers.
- It would be beneficial if agencies enhanced surveillance and monitoring systems to detect food safety risks and outbreaks more quickly.

# Session 2: Discussions



For food agencies, it is important to build trust with stakeholders prior to a crisis.



There is merit in reviewing learnings from crisis simulation exercises. These could be shared within IHFAF.



Crises can be a catalyst to improve food safety systems if they are reviewed with lessons learned.



Our food systems are fragile and vulnerable. Consider what is the one thing that we are solely dependent on, but we don't have full control of?



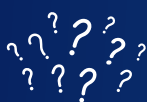
It is important to include less developed countries with less developed regulatory systems.



Where necessary for food security, relaxing standards during crises has to be done carefully based on science and reviewed when crisis is over to see if permanent change is necessary.



It is important to build connections and relationships with the various actors in the food system so everyone can work together in a crisis.



Other considerations: Is it possible to predict a crisis? What are the characteristics of a crisis? How do you leverage a crisis?



## Session 3:



### Session Chair:

Prof. Hisham S. Aljadhey,  
CEO, Saudi Food and Drug  
Authority

# Crisis Communication and the role of transnational systems

This session examined food safety or food fraud crises management which can be time intensive and all-consuming. But ignoring crisis communication can be to the peril of the organisation. There is no doubt that good communication in a crisis can mean the difference between good and bad management. No matter how well a crisis is managed in the background in terms of consumer protection, unless the consumer is reassured and trust is maintained, organisations can be irrevocably damaged. This session aimed to enhance understanding of good practices in crisis communication and the global systems that facilitate this.



Mr James Ramsay, Head of Communication Unit, European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) opened the session with an overview of the European Food Safety Authority's best practices in crisis communication.



Next, Dr. Luz de Regil, Head of Unit of Multisectoral Actions in Food Systems, World Health Organisation outlined the International Food Safety Authorities Network (INFOSAN) System.



Dr. Shaun Smith, Risk Manager, Food Safety Authority of Ireland outlined the EU Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed (RASFF) system.

Finally, Ms. Roaa Almarwani, Risk Communication Senior Expert, Saudi Food and Drug Authority presented on the risk/crisis communication system in place in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region.

# Session 3

## Best practice in crisis communication: an EU agency perspective



Mr James Ramsay, Head of Communication Unit, European Food Safety Authority (EFSA)

### Overview

Mr James Ramsay opened the session by defining when a food or feed safety incident is considered urgent at European level. For this, two or more of the following criteria must be met: the risk to public health is high; the scale of the incident is large or likely to become so; the incident has occurred, or is believed to have occurred, as a result of an act of terrorism; high actual or potential level of media interest or public concern; vulnerable groups of the population are or are likely to be disproportionately affected; the source of the problem is unknown.

EFSA's mission is to communicate in a timely, clear, coordinated and transparent way during a crisis. EFSA, in consultation with the Communications Experts Network, developed [guidelines](#) to encourage consistent best practice during incidents related to EFSA's mandate. The aim was to provide clear and practical recommendations for communicating with external audiences during a food or feed-related incident. This includes principles of good crisis communications; various templates and checklists; tips for handling media during a crisis; what to do during the 'Golden Hour'; recommendations for post-crisis wrap-up and evaluation etc. The 'Golden Hour' refers to the time when the decision is made to put the crisis plan in motion – bringing people together, analysing information and coordinating a response. In a crisis, it is essential to take control of your communications and establish your own narrative as quickly as possible. It is important to be prepared in advance as much as possible – have staff, contacts, procurement, IT, content and training in place. EFSA are working on a Crisis Communications Roadmap with a number of deliverables for 2023.

### Conclusions

- Effective crisis communication requires preparation, transparency, and engagement with stakeholders. It is important to have a crisis communication plan in place that outlines roles and responsibilities, communication protocols, and decision-making processes. This plan should be regularly reviewed, updated, and tested to ensure its effectiveness.
- In a crisis situation, it is important to act quickly and transparently. Provide timely and accurate information to stakeholders, including the public, media, regulators, and employees. Be honest about what you know and what you don't know, and avoid speculation or misinformation.
- Use multiple communications channels.
- After the crisis is over, conduct a post-crisis review to identify what worked well and what could be improved. Use this information to update the crisis communication plan and improve the organization's overall crisis preparedness.



# Session 3

## The International Food Safety Authorities Network (INFOSAN) System



Dr Luz de Regil, Head of Unit of Multisectoral Actions in Food Systems, World Health Organisation

### Overview

Dr Luz de Regil began her presentation by explaining that the International Food Safety Authorities Network System is a voluntary network, created in 2004 with 187 WHO Member States participating (around 800 members). It is jointly managed by the World Health Organisation and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

The objectives of INFOSAN are to promote the rapid exchange of information during food safety incidents; share information and resources on important food safety related issues of global interest; promote partnerships and collaboration between national agencies, between countries, and between networks and help countries strengthen their capacity to manage food safety emergencies.

INFOSAN reacts to food safety events by assessing reports and signals of food safety events of potential international significance; requesting information from WHO Member States; responds to requests for international assistance to respond to food safety events; disseminating alerts and information on its website; encouraging multisectoral collaboration at the national level and promoting experience and best practices sharing on food safety emergency management. It also has links to various other networks such as European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) and the EFSA Emerging Risk Exchange Network (EREN).

### Conclusions

- Actively participating in INFOSAN can allow countries to be alerted, take appropriate measures to mitigate risks and prevent any possible impact on public health.
- Building partnerships with other stakeholders working on food safety emergency at the international level is essential to avoid duplication and ensure information is streamlined during food safety emergencies.
- International collaboration plays a key role before, during and after managing international food safety emergencies. We can always do better together and learn from each other.

# Session 3

## The EU Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed (RASFF)



Dr Shaun Smith, Risk Manager, Food Safety Authority of Ireland

### Overview

Dr Shaun Smith began his presentation explaining that the EU Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed (RASFF) was founded in 1979 and is used by EU member states along with Iceland, Norway and Liechtenstein. The RASFF system allows member states to warn each other of threats in the food chain when they have crossed national borders. A RASFF is issued when a member state identifies a serious food safety risk in food that has been imported or exported in the European Union; a batch, container, cargo of food or feed is rejected entry to the Union at a border port; allows follow-ups to notifications by other member states, and information notifications.

In Ireland incidents are notified from various sources – RASFF, official agencies, food business operators, official laboratories, FSAI audits and investigations, the Food Standards Agency and Food Standards Scotland, information from third countries or international agencies and other sources (consumer groups, customer complaints, stakeholders, media).

Dr Smith also provided an overview of food incident management which includes detecting, assessing, managing and communicating the issue. 24/7 cover is required. In 2022, RASFF dealt with 4,361 notifications. The number of notifications has increased over the years.

### Conclusions

- The RASFF system is an example of an integrated multi-country information sharing system that enables fast risk management action to protect public health.
- Such systems are a mine of information for trend analysis and can feed into risk management/regulatory policy and planning.
- Rapid alert systems should provide the public with information on incidents to the extent that is possible without breaching legal obligations.



# Session 3

## Risk/crisis communication system in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region

Ms Roaa Almarwani, Risk Communication Senior Expert, Saudi Food and Drug Authority

### Overview

Ms Roaa Almarwani presented an overview of the Gulf Rapid Alert System for Food (GRASF) and the Rapid Alert Center for Food in Saudi Arabia. The GRASF is a fast and effective way to exchange information between the relevant government agencies in the GCC countries, when any potential risks to human or animal health are detected, at all stages of the food chain.

The GCC is a regional intergovernmental political and economic union consisting of six Arab countries in the Persian Gulf region, including Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). 90% of its food is imported to feed 57 million people. Strict regulations and standards have been established to ensure the safety of imported food. GRASF allows for cooperation and the quick exchange of information between the Gulf states and the coordination of action to be taken.

Accordingly, the Saudi Arabian Rapid Alert System was established in 2009 and is managed by the Rapid Food Alert Centre in the Saudi Food and Drug Authority. Saudi Arabia imports approximately 80% of its food from nearly 140 countries. Food safety levels vary in these countries. It monitors and receives alerts and notifications at local, regional and international level. It determines their relevance, assesses the risks and takes the necessary action. It communicates via press releases, infographics, fact sheets, podcasts, webinars and a chatbot 'Ask Sara'.

Miss Almarwani spoke about the importance of designated contact points in related departments to ensure quick communication, choosing clear pictures for products included in warning/recall posts to minimize any confusion to consumers. She also mentioned how it was important to clarify important details such as how to read the batch number, what to do with the products and the meaning behind the dates on the products. This helps to ensure that consumers are informed & empowered to make safe choices and protect themselves.

Finally she emphasised that effective communication is essential in managing a food safety crisis. By being proactive, transparent, and responsive the impact of a crisis on public health and safety can be minimized, as well as on the reputation of the food industry & authority.

### Conclusions

- Rapid alert systems should be integrated with other food safety systems to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the overall food safety system.
- Rapid alert systems should be continuously monitored and evaluated to identify areas for improvement. This can help to ensure that the system remains reliable, efficient, and effective over time.

# Session 3: Discussions



Systems should have indicators for measuring the efficiency of the system – it can be harder to set measures of effectiveness. The systems in place in different countries are similar and that helps countries work together. Systems help speed up transfer of accurate information which helps timely risk communications.



It is important to have good relations with businesses as a means of ensuring all players learn from an incident.



Communication systems are about sharing information about hazard distribution in food. They are not for sharing risk assessments. Each member receiving data has to decide the best risk management approach in their own country.



The media also has a role in risk communication. It is important to be open and proactive with the public and media. This can be difficult, but it is important to provide them with clear information on their timescale. If we leave a vacuum in information then we risk it being filled by disinformation and/or speculation.





**Dr Sandra Cuthbert,  
Chief Executive,  
Food Standards  
Australia New  
Zealand**

# Conclusions

Dr Sandra Cuthbert led the conclusions session. The discussions captured are featured in the 'Discussions' sections of this report. A summary of the previous sessions and conclusions was presented.

In general, the key themes that arose were the importance of:



Collaboration,



Crisis preparedness,



Continuous monitoring, evaluation and improvement of alert systems and data sources.

# Final session



## Session Chair:

Dr Pamela Byrne, Chief Executive, Food Safety Authority of Ireland

In the final session of the meeting, Dr Byrne, returned to the questions she posed in her opening statement. Below is a summary of key themes which arose in response to these questions concerning the future of the IHFAF.

## What is the value of the International Heads of Food Agencies Forum?

- Building relationships and networking between heads/senior leaders of food safety agencies.
- Exchanging and sharing information and good practices.
- Learning and hearing new ideas. Hearing different perspectives.
- Provides an opportunity for bilateral meetings and discussions.
- Developing a better understanding of how systems work in other countries.
- Opening up lines of communication which might not already exist.



## What does the forum see the future and structure of the International Heads of Food Agencies Forum to be?

- A welcoming place to new members joining.
- Potential to expand the group and included developing countries.
- Main focus should remain on risk management.
- Members are happy with current meeting structure.
- The current Terms of Reference are a good basis to continue the work.
- Working groups could be established to focus on certain issues and present back.
- The forum could provide collective leadership in shaping future discussions.
- The forum could champion food safety and be a blueprint for certain practices.
- It is important for the forum to be complementary to other forums.





# Final session

## Session Chair:

Dr Pamela Byrne, Chief Executive, Food Safety Authority of Ireland

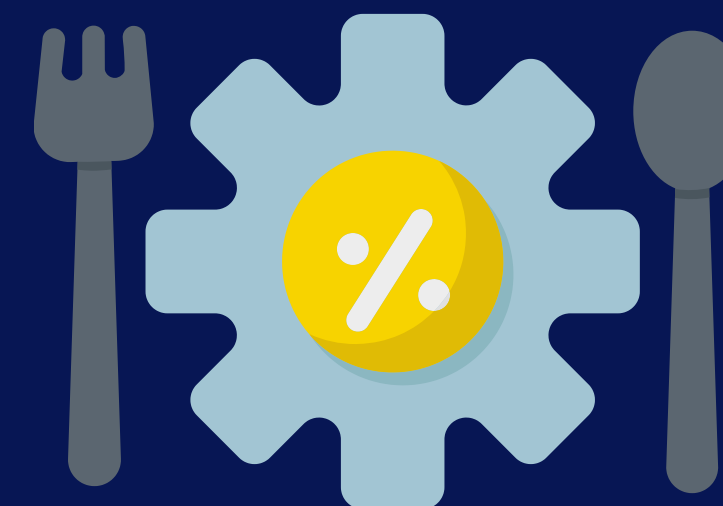
IHFAF

INTERNATIONAL HEADS OF FOOD AGENCIES FORUM

Since 2020

## What are some themes for future forum meetings?

- The innovation environment (novel food/processes). New innovations in food safety, techniques, and how food is produced. Artificial intelligence and the digitisation of the food chain.
- Regulatory regimes for food and health claims and where they overlap.
- Shocks to the food system and practising for a crisis, derogations - what can we risk and what do we need to protect? Supply chain vulnerability – security vs safety.
- The implementation of existing law.
- Collaboration on managing food incidents. Consider the learnings from previous crisis simulation exercises.
- Consider 'risk benefit assessments' (e.g. new gene editing techniques, climate issues etc.). Other legitimate factors to balance risk assessment.
- Risk management strategies. Consider the groups risk appetite. Risk management beyond black and white limits.
- Food safety as an enabling factor. The value proposition for investment by governments in food safety.
- Climate change and effects on food safety. How food safety can become an enabler to the food system. Trade-offs: food security / food sustainability / food safety.
- Sharing experiences of media engagement.



# Final session

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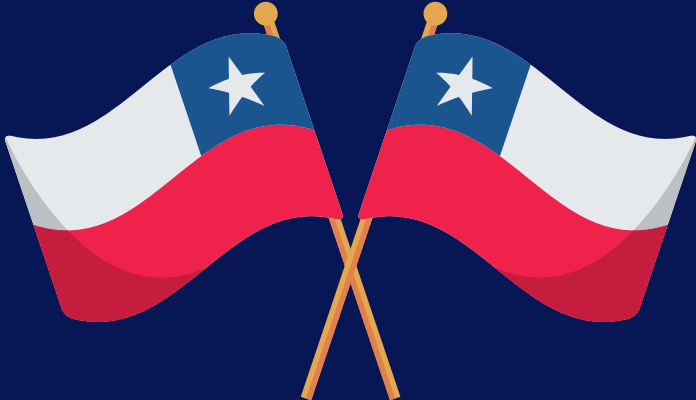


## Possible Future IHFAF Hosts

See the list of possible future IHFAF meeting hosts. These are to be confirmed.

- Singapore - 2024
- Chile - 2025
- New Zealand - 2026/27

Future host countries will be invited to join the Executive Committee, along with other members who would like to help develop the agenda for future meetings.





# Conclusion

The meeting was concluded by Dr Pamela Byrne with some words of thanks for a successful and productive International Heads of Food Agencies Meeting.

Overall, the meeting provided a unique opportunity for the sharing of information on good practices; the exchange of information; and the strengthening of relationships which are critical to building trust so that there is an appropriate response in times of crisis/incidents, of a global nature.

