

ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON THE MICROBIOLOGICAL SAFETY OF FOOD

AD HOC GROUP ON IMPORTED FOODS

FINAL REPORT TO THE ACMSF

Introduction and background

1. At the ACMSF meeting in December 2002, the Committee agreed to set up the *Ad Hoc* Group on the microbiological safety of Imported Foods. This was in response to work that the ACMSF was conducting on horizon scanning in several areas including imported foods. The terms of reference and membership of the Group are provided at Annex A. A list of contributors to the deliberations of the *Ad Hoc* Group are listed at Annex B and the Group wishes to express its gratitude to those individuals for their time and effort.
2. This paper summarises previously reported conclusions reached by the Group on the microbiological safety of imported food relating to current processes in place to prevent unsafe food entering the UK. It also updates the Committee on recent work carried out by the Group to consider an FSA commissioned review of the microbiological risks of illegally imported bush meat.

Issues investigated

3. The Group met on six occasions and considered documentary and verbal evidence relating to current processes in place to prevent unsafe food entering the UK. Issues considered included:
 - legally imported animal-based foods and foods of a non-animal origin;
 - illegally imported foods;
 - foodborne disease surveillance in third countries;
 - traceability
 - imported food controls
 - outbreaks of foodborne illness and imported foods; and
 - bushmeat.
4. In addressing these issues (with the exception of bush meat), previous reports made to the ACMSF (included at Annexes C & D) concluded that:
 - a) More information was needed in order to decide whether sufficient is being done to manage the microbiological safety of foods of a non-animal origin entering the market.

- b) The systematic approach to surveying and capturing information on foodborne diseases in other countries could lead to improved safety of imported foods. This additional safeguard is dependent upon such information being used to identify potential risks that could then be effectively communicated to all of those involved in the management of safety of imported food. This should not be restricted to foods of animal origin and further consideration should be given to this issue.
- c) Further consideration was needed on the role of traceability systems given their importance for effectively identifying and controlling microbial hazards and as part of this, gaining a clearer understanding of the risk posed from imported foods.
- d) Regulation (EC) No. 178/2002 places new requirements on food businesses to ensure their food is produced, processed and handled to consistent standards whether it originates inside or outside the Community. Evidence suggests that controls will become more effective in relation to food of non-animal origin. Details have yet to be finalised. Therefore, currently the potential effectiveness of the new control regime cannot be assessed.
- e) Traceability controls have recently come into force. Their effectiveness is as yet unknown. This requirement will facilitate improved investigation techniques to be developed.
- f) Due to the limited reporting of provenance data, few reported outbreaks have been attributed to imported foods. Effort was needed to collate more detailed information in order to establish the origin of foods implicated in outbreaks.
- g) Further information was needed to assess the risk associated with the microbiological safety of imported food under the forthcoming legislative framework.
- h) There was a need to monitor developments in co-ordination of import controls, as it is critical to the effective management of the safety of imported food.

Bush meat

5. At the Food Standards Agency's request, the Group subsequently considered an Agency-funded review of the microbiological risks of illegal imported bush meat. The review was presented to the ACMSF at the June 2005 ACMSF meeting¹. In light of comments made at that meeting, the *Ad Hoc* Group considered the review further at its last meeting in October 2005.

¹ The minutes from this meeting are available at <http://www.food.gov.uk/science/ouradvisors/microbiogafety/acmsfmeets/acmsf2005/acmsfmeet221105/acmsfmeet090605minutes>.

6. The Group received presentations from the authors of the reports commissioned by the FSA on the microbiological risks to human health from bush meat and the controls in place to prevent illegal imports. Members discussed survival rates of viruses likely to be contained within bush meat, and the conditions that were needed for growth, noting that viruses only replicated in living cells of appropriate organisms. They recognised that there was a clear association between outbreaks of monkey pox and with killing of animals. Viruses such as monkey pox were more likely to be acquired at the butchery/handling stage of through cuts by direct handling and contact, and not from eating meat. Members agreed that there was likely to be little or no risk from eating bush meat, acknowledging that such a risk was difficult to quantify. Members also recognised that normal cooking would probably destroy any viruses and bacteria present, although there was no data available to verify this.
7. The Group also received a presentation from Wildlife DNA Services on current government-funded research on species identification of seized meat. This short 6 month study applied DNA techniques to investigate the species composition of potential bush meat consignments illegally entering the UK. The Group agreed that the research methodology used in the project provided a large potential source of information and that it would be beneficial if additional funding could be obtained to carry out further DNA sample analysis to identify the presence of any viral strains on the seized meat. Members noted that the current test would only detect DNA viruses, although the protocol could be modified to look at RNA viruses. The Group also suggested that, as the majority of bush meat imports occurred over the summer period, it would be beneficial if such a study could cover a calendar year.

Conclusions

8. Having reviewed written and verbal evidence on bush meat presented to the Group, Members concluded that:
 - a) The risk of foodborne illness from consumption of bush meat appeared to be very low, and the risk of foodborne illness from cross contamination was also minimal.
 - b) Normal cooking would probably destroy any viruses and bacteria present, although there was no data available to verify this.
 - c) There was a lack of quantitative data relating to the microbiological risks associated with bush meat. However, to partially address this, consideration should be given to the provision of funding to extend research currently in progress on DNA speciation identification. Such work should be prefaced by a pilot study to assess the feasibility of the methodology to

detect viral strains on seized meat. Consideration should also be given to archiving any extracted DNA samples for future research.

Recommendations

- 9 Key recommendations arising from the entire work carried out by the *ad hoc* Group on imported foods were that:
- a) **The ACMSF receive an annual update on imported foods from the Health Protection Agency which includes data on trends in outbreaks and vehicles which are linked to imported foods.**
 - b) **The status of endemic foodborne disease in third countries that export foods to the UK is examined.**
 - c) **Consideration should be given to a systematic approach to surveying and capturing information on foodborne diseases in other countries that could lead to improving safety of imported foods, providing such information was used to identify potential risks that could then be effectively communicated to all those involved in the management of food safety of imported foods (agencies, industry and public health professionals). This should not be restricted to just foods of animal origin.**
 - d) **The FSA remind Local Authorities of the importance of investigating the origin of food and ingredients implicated in outbreaks in view of the new traceability legislation in place.**
 - e) **FSA consider approaching Defra to discuss additional funding to extend the DNA Wildlife Services work on DNA speciation identification in order to include examination of viral DNA and RNA where possible in seized meat. In addition consideration should be given to archiving any extracted DNA samples.**

**Ad Hoc Group on Imported Foods
November 2005**

Membership

Chair

Mr Philip Mepham

Members

Dr David Brown
Mr Alec Kyriakides
Ms Lynda Noddings
Professor Laura Pidcock

Secretariat

Dr Lucy Foster
Mrs Liz Stretton

Previous Members

Chair

Ms Sue Davies (Until December 2003)

Members

Professor Mac Johnston (Until March 2004)
Mr David Piccaver (Until March 2005)

Terms of Reference

To assemble information on the current situation on imported foods in order to decide whether there is a potential problem in relation to the microbiological safety of food; and to recommend to the ACMSF whether the Committee needs to undertake further action

List of contributors to the Ad Hoc Group Review

The *Ad Hoc* Group would like to thank those listed below for the information which they provided.

Dr Bob Adak	Health Protection Agency
Mrs Sarah Appleby	Food Standards Agency
Ms Catherine Bowles	Food Standards Agency
Mr Tony Flower	Food Standards Agency
Mr Mike Glavin	Food Standards Agency
Mr Ned Kingcott	Independent Consultant
Dr Christine Little	Health Protection Agency
Dr Ross McEwing	DNA Wildlife Service
Ms Pam Rogers	HM Revenue and Customs
Dr Roger Skinner	Independent Consultant
Mr Nigel Widden	Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
Mr Steve Pugh	Food Standards Agency

Annex C – ACM/665 from December 2003 meeting

<http://www.food.gov.uk/science/ouradvisors/microbiogsafety/acmsfmeets/acmsfmeet2003/acmsf50thmeeting/agenda>

Annex D – ACM/732 from March 2005 meeting

<http://www.food.gov.uk/science/ouradvisors/microbiogsafety/acmsfmeets/acmsf2005/acmsf17305/agenda17305>