

REVIEW OF THE FOOD STANDARDS AGENCY'S RESPONSE TO THE INCIDENT INVOLVING DIOXINS IN MEAT

Issue

1. To seek the Board's agreement to the action plan which addresses the recommendations from the incident review

Strategic Aims

2. This work contributes to the Agency's strategic aim of 'Building and maintaining the trust of stakeholders in our handling of food safety issues' in the 2005-2010 Strategic Plan.

Background/Discussion

3. The review of the Agency's handling of the incident has been carried out in two parts and is presented in separate reports.
4. Part 1 (Annex 1) reviewed information regarding the Agency's current protocol for handling incidents and establishing a timeline of how the incident progressed. Both FSA staff and stakeholders were consulted on the handling of the incident and their responses summarised. FSA staff completed questionnaires regarding their roles and experience during the incident, and this was followed up with face to face interviews conducted by Steelhenge. A separate questionnaire was sent to 232 stakeholders (this included food and feed industry and their associated trade associations, local authorities and other Government departments) asking for their views on the quality and timing of information disseminated by the Agency, the Agency's overall response to the incident, and the conduct and outcome of the scoping group meeting organised by the Agency at the start of the incident. A total of 57 responses were received from external stakeholders.
5. Part 2 (Annex 2) focussed on the Agency's interaction with the EU throughout the incident, our communication with other Government departments (specifically Defra and the Department of Health, during the first 72 hours of the incident), and our communication with Northern Ireland Ministers and officials in the early stages of the incident. This review, with officials and Ministers, used face to face interviews and written comments.

Summary of responses

6. External stakeholders who responded to the review questionnaire focussed on communication as an area where they felt the Agency could have performed better, particularly in the first few days of the incident. This included the timeliness of communicating with external stakeholders. In addition concern was raised about the accuracy of the information being provided, particularly in relation to the pork affected. As the incident progressed the information from the Agency was considered to be accurate, timely and proportionate, but it was noted that there were sometimes conflicting messages communicated by the different FSA offices.
7. Colleagues within the Agency raised concerns about the scoping group meeting which was held with industry at the beginning of the incident, the effectiveness of communication within the Agency during the course of the incident, and the respective roles of colleagues in the day to day handling of the incident.
8. The second part of the review, which focussed on certain key stakeholders, also highlighted concerns about the timeliness of communication from the Agency to Ministers in Defra and the Department of Health, with the European Commission and the UK Permanent Representation to the EU (UKRep). Specifically in relation to communicating with the Commission a need for regular communication via the RASFF¹ system was highlighted. At the start of the incident there was a delay in establishing which Government Department was taking the lead in the incident as the issue covered different parts of the UK and the Republic of Ireland, and had implications for other departments in addition to the Agency. Reference is also made to the European Commission, at the start of the incident, considering imposing further measures in the UK as a consequence of the limited information being provided by the UK and its initial handling of the incident. The Agency was not aware of this until it was raised as part of this review.

¹ RASFF The Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed (RASFF) has a legal basis in EC Regulation 178/2002 and is operated by the European Commission (through DG SANCO). It serves to alert the EC and Member States to serious direct or indirect risks to human health from food or feed within the EU. Each notification includes the nature of the hazard the source and distribution of the food or feed, and the action taken by the notifying country.

Recommendations from the review

9. The Agency's Emergencies Group² has discussed the recommendations made by Steelhenge arising from the first part of the review of the incident, and these can be grouped into 4 broad areas:

- The purpose and timing of the incident scoping meeting
- Training of staff at all levels, including Directors and the Chief Executive, so that they are clear on their roles and responsibilities during an incident
- Reviewing the Agency's out of hours response to major incidents and communication within the Agency during the incident
- Strengthening our engagement with member states in responding to incidents involving other member states, or the entire EU

10. Additional recommendations arising from the second part of the review include:

- Strengthening our engagement with the Commission and UKRep
- Extending the stakeholder checklist for major incidents, to include Ministers and contacts in the Devolved Administrations
- Establishing 'Bird table' meetings with relevant Government departments

Action plan

11. An action plan has been developed by the Agency's Emergencies Group which recommends that the following steps are taken by the Agency:

- The aims and objectives of the Scoping Group³ are clearly defined so that stakeholder expectations can be managed.

² The Agency's Emergencies Group comprises representation across all groups in the Agency including Legal and Communications Directorates, and Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The Secretariat is provided by the Agency's Incidents Response Team.

³ The purpose of the Scoping group is for the Agency to gather information relating to the incident, as a valuable component of the risk assessment process, to inform subsequent risk management

- Central core roles for teams are established in response to incidents so that staff are clear of their responsibilities and have received appropriate training. This includes the roles and responsibilities of individuals in the Gold-Silver-Bronze groups⁴, and consideration being given to an exercise involving all staff so that this approach can be tested further.
 - Developing and rehearsing an effective system for out of hours response to a major incident.
 - Developing further the Agency's portfolio of checklists and templates for briefings, Ministerial submissions, minutes and agendas to improve communication within and outside of the Agency.
 - Utilising additional staff resource in the early stages of a major incident in order to meet and manage the expectations of stakeholders.
 - Ensuring greater consistency in communications to external stakeholders.
12. Taking into account the additional recommendations from the second review the FSA incidents protocol⁵ will be reviewed. Specific attention will be given to improving the Agency's communications and engagement with Ministers, including Ministers in the Devolved Administrations, the Commission and UKRep.
13. The re-structuring of the Food Safety Group within the Agency includes provision for a larger incident team with a more enhanced role in responding to incidents. This new team, working in collaboration with the incidents teams in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, will ensure greater consistency in handling of future incidents, and will implement the action plan agreed by the Emergencies Committee in response to these recommendations.
14. In addition, the Agency is increasing its presence in Brussels through locating a permanent member of staff in the UKRep office. This will allow greater communication with both UKRep and the Commission during incidents.

decisions. Scoping group meetings are not briefing sessions for communication of information/decisions to wider stakeholders or for decision making.

⁴ The Gold-Silver-Bronze approach to incident management is used for large, complex incidents. For example this structure was only used 3 times in 2008. In such incidents a Director would lead the incident.

⁵ The FSA Incidents Protocol covers the rules that should be followed by all staff during environmental contamination and food incidents.

Impact

15. The actions identified will be taken forward by the Agency Incidents Team, and will not have any additional impact on staff and financial resource.

Conclusion

16. Taking forward the actions agreed by the Agency's Emergencies Group will make it clear to our stakeholders that we take seriously our role in handling food safety incidents, and are committed to improving our performance in future incidents.

Previous Board consideration

17. The Board has received oral updates as part of the Chief Executives report on the incident and was informed the review was being undertaken.

Board Action Required

18. The Board is asked to:

- **note** the key conclusions from the review; and
- **comment** on the proposed action plan to address the recommendations from the review.

Review of the FSA incident response internal processes and procedures in relation to the dioxins in meat incident

(Document attached separately)

Review of key FSA external stakeholder Relationships in responding to the dioxins in meat incident

(Document attached separately)