



**REPORT FROM THE CHAIR OF THE NORTHERN IRELAND FOOD ADVISORY COMMITTEE**

**NIFAC Meetings**

NIFAC meeting 8<sup>th</sup> April

1. NIFAC met on 8<sup>th</sup> April at the FSANI offices, Belfast. A summary of the advice from the meeting is as follows:

*Review of Official Supervision of BSE Controls for OTM Cattle*

2. The Committee was grateful to Paul Holley, Head of TSE Policy (SRM) and Jim Ross, head of FSANI Meat Hygiene and Imported Foods for their overview of the issues. The following advice and observations were noted:
  - The Committee were supportive that ‘against a background of reducing risks we can extend the system applied to UTM cattle to OTM cattle and move to a more risk based audit / inspection approach’, but noted that the effective monitoring of the new system is very important to ensure that there is no increase in risk.
  - The Committee agreed that ‘we should continue with our cautious stepped approach, with appropriate monitoring of each step before moving to the next’. This to ensure continued consumer confidence.
  - Concerning the health marking derogation, the Committee supported its invocation, to be granted on a plant by plant basis in line with a risk-based approach.
  - The Committee supported an earlier recommendation that the system of ‘health marks’ used in EU should be re-examined and made less subject to abuse.
  - The Committee agreed that the derogation for butchers to remove OTM VC specified risk material should not take place.

*The Role and Work of the Agency’s Social Science Research Unit (SSRU)*

3. The Committee was grateful to Jane Barrett, Head of FSA Social Science Research and Robyn Ackerman for their overview of the remit and progress of the SSRU. The following advice and observations were noted:

- The Committee welcomed the increased role of social science in the Agency and encouraged its greater integration alongside biological sciences in policy development.
- There is a need to explore potential diversity between the four nations in UK in order to inform dietary advice and behavioural change messages. We need to understand whether differences are real or imagined.
- The cross working between SSRU and the ACMSF was welcomed and SSRU encouraged to engage more of the Agency's scientific advisory committees.
- The ability of SSRU to inform a lot of the Agency's social marketing was especially welcomed, as was their work with the industry and enforcement sectors.
- The disciplines of SSRU must be employed across the Agency to ensure appropriate statistical power in surveys.

*Information Item – An Introductory Brief of GM*

4. The Committee was grateful to Clair Baynton, Head of Novel Foods, Additives and Supplements, who gave an overview on genetic modification of food and animal feed, and the policy issues relating to this. The following observations were noted:
  - The genetic modification of food and feed is a clear example of where the EU legislative process works well scientifically, but not politically.
  - The apparent reduction in consumers' concern over GM could be the perception that GM technology is not being used. Alternatively, it could be that consumers are becoming used to seeing GM used in minor ingredients and observing no adverse reactions.
  - The issues over GM are not easily resolved, but never the less their resolution is becoming more critical in a market driven food economy.

*Report from the Northern Ireland Strategic Committee on Food Surveillance*

5. The Committee was grateful to Brian Smyth, Chairman of the Northern Ireland Strategic Committee on Food Surveillance for his overview of the Committee's report on food sampling by District Councils in Northern Ireland in 2007. The following advice and observations were noted:
  - The work of the Strategic Committee on Food Surveillance was welcomed, and the data collected will inform the Agency's enforcement strategy and

district councils on the future direction of sampling within environmental health departments.

- The Committee noted the cautions on over-interpreting the data because of the sampling regime used.
- The Committee recognised the part played by **safe food** in the upgrading of the NI Public Health Laboratory (NIPHL) that facilitated such a good uptake of the FSS (UK) database in Northern Ireland.
- The absence of pathogens in the food samples submitted was noted and welcomed. As before, NIFAC encouraged a joined up approach to the submission and analysis of animal, clinical and food data in order to better understand the etiology and ecology of food pathogens and better inform preventive measures.
- A further breakdown of the 'chemical' categories identified would be helpful for greater analysis, for example, of allergens. Although numbers are small as yet, better categorisation would be helpful long term.
- Similarly a breakdown on the reasons for 'chemical' failures by reason of poor or incorrect labelling or misleading labels was requested.
- It was noted that qualitative assessments such as total viable colony counts (TVC) of fermented and non-fermented products should be reported separately.
- The Committee recognised that most samples were taken from retailers and caterers rather than producers. There may be a need to broaden the scope of sampling to ensure that producers, importers and distributors were not excluded from the sampling programme. However sampling should ideally be informed by a risk analysis as well as the EU requirements.
- A long term aspiration may be to monitor the antibiotic resistance of organisms found in food in order to inform long term trends.

### **Meetings with Others**

6. The Chairman has met with a number of stakeholders during the period. For details please see the Board Member Engagements paper number SO 09/04/04

### **Future NIFAC meetings**

7. The programme and provisional agenda for future meetings of the Committee is described below.

DATE	EVENT	POTENTIAL TOPICS
19 May 2009	Open meeting, The Mount Conference Centre, Belfast	<p><b><u>Themed stakeholder meeting on the Agency's Strategy for 2010-2015</u></b></p> <p>This event will mirror the stakeholder meetings convened on the same topic in England.</p>
24 June 2009	Open meeting, Queens University Belfast	<p><b><u>Themed science meeting</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Science Review of the Agency</li> <li>• Stakeholder discussion – an overview of the science needs in NI that impact on the Agency.</li> </ul>
2 September 2009	FSANI Offices, Belfast	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Themed meeting – FSANI and Local Authorities in Northern Ireland</li> </ul>