

Industry Stakeholder Meeting Tuesday 28th September 2004

Attendees

Industry Representatives

Cecil Mathers – NI Meat Exporters Association
Colin Coffey – NI Grain Trade Association
Dick James – NI Fish Producers Association
Gordon Orr – Mushroom Industry Association NI
Keith Smyton – Pork & Bacon Forum
Michael Bell – NI Food and Drink Association
Mike Tempest – Livestock & Meat Commission

FSANI Officials

Morris McAllister -
Chairman
Gerry McCurdy
Maria Jennings
Deirdre Ni Chleirigh
Olivia Keown
Ruth Watson -
Secretariat

1. Introduction

The Chairman opened the meeting by welcoming everyone to the Food Standards Agency NI and went on to explain the following points:

- Re-cap on why the initiative is happening
- The resignation of Sir John Krebs
- The appointment of the new NI Board Member
- The agenda for the open Board meeting in Belfast on 14th October 2004
- The agenda for the Northern Ireland Advisory Committee (NIAC) meeting on 5th October 2004

The Chairman also invited delegates to attend the open Board meeting at the Hilton Hotel in Belfast, which will include a short question and answer session.

2. The Agency's Draft new Strategic Plan

The Chairman reminded the meeting that the consultation period for the Agency's draft Strategic Plan for 2005 - 2010 closed on 25th June 2004. The response rate was favourable, with 200 replies received from the 5000 organisations consulted. The Board will, it is expected, agree the draft

Strategic Plan at their October meeting, which it is hoped will be published towards the end of 2004.

The Agency is currently being restructured to meet the demands of the new Strategic Plan. Inter-alia a new directorate of Consumer Choice and Dietary Health will be set up, headed by Gill Fine, currently Head of Food and Health at Sainsbury's, to meet the demands of our increased focus on diet and nutrition.

3. Invitees Topics and General Issues

The following topics for discussion were raised by the invitees:

Response times with regards to queries

The NI Meat Exporters Association (NIMEA) suggested that the FSA act in a slow manner when dealing with queries. The Chairman noted this concern and explained that every effort is made to respond effectively and in a timely manner to all inquiries from whatever source. He asked NIMEA to let him have details of any specific issues, which may still remain unresolved. Others present had not experienced similar difficulties

Retail Labelling and Traceability

Concerns were expressed regarding the current labelling legislation and perceived difficulties of policing Third Country Imports. The feed industry expressed the view that Third Country Imports are not subjected to the same levels of stringency that UK producers face due to infrequency of Food and Veterinary Office (FVO) missions. The Livestock and Meat Commission (LMC) raised concerns over the enforcement of the Beef Labelling Regulations. The Deputy Director advised that this issue will be raised at the forthcoming meeting with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) and the District Councils.

Definition of Sustainability

The representative from the NI Fish Producers Association raised the topic of sustainability. The Chairman pointed out that the government requires all departments to ensure that policies are developed in a sustainable manner

and must manage their operations in an environmentally friendly manner. The Agency is currently developing such policies along with other government departments. A point was raised that the waste strategy developed by the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) of the Department of Environment (DoE) is not inclusive of the fishery industry.

Relationships between Industry and the FSA

A comment was made that whilst the FSA enjoys a close relationship with the relevant industries, there is a slight concern regarding the comments made by members of the NIAC. It was felt that some members of the committee simply did not understand the intricacies of industry. The Chairman said that whilst he understood the concerns he explained that some committee members are laymen. Sometimes comments are made which could be misconstrued but the Executive always endeavours to correct factual errors at the time. The Chairman did acknowledge that opportunities should be taken to improve understanding of the industry. The NIAC is currently considering its Forward Work Programme and areas in which industry spokesmen could offer valuable advice would be identified. The NIAC will endeavour to build closer relationships with industries in the coming months. The invitees welcomed this news and offered to be of service.

Relationships between the FSA and the government

The Chairman briefly outlined the accountability arrangements and advised that the Agency's annual reports and accounts are published on the website.

Relationships between the FSA and the Food Safety Promotion Board

Industry representatives stated that there was confusion over the remit of the Food Safety Promotion Board (FSPB). The Chairman explained the background to; role of; and relationships with the FSPB.

4. Food Labelling

Olivia Keown invited stakeholders to consider the EU consolidation of labelling rules and the national food labelling regulations consolidation. She made them aware of developments to the EU proposal for a regulation on

nutrition and health claims, and brought them up to date with the FSA position on the signposting of foods.

5. Salt

Deirdre Ni Chleirigh introduced the Agency's salt campaign which was launched on 15th September. This is the first phase of a large public health campaign aimed at:

- Raising consumers' awareness of the health issues associated with the excessive intake of salt
- Explaining how easy it is to consume too much salt because of its presence in so many processed foods.

To support this, the Agency will also be carrying out a 'shopping basket' survey, which aims to find out how much salt is in the average consumer's shopping basket. The second phase will follow early in 2005. We have received a very good response from the food industry, both prior to and after the launch of the campaign. It was noted however that the Agency must be careful to be clear on the portrayal of the message: reduce NOT stop salt intake. The Food and Drink Federation (FDF), who are to provide salt and sodium figures on food labels will facilitate this. We must also be aware that marketers may look for ways around such clear labelling for their own monetary gain. The media has a large part to play in exposing such incidents.

6. Concluding comments and Close

Mr McAllister sought comments on the meeting. All present considered it to have been a very useful exercise and looked forward to the next meeting. Mr McCurdy urged the representatives to respond to the consultation on the consolidated EU Hygiene Regulations that will be circulated at the start of October. It was agreed that the current format of separate stakeholder meetings should be adhered to, however, this did not preclude inviting representatives from the Consumer and Enforcement organisations if and when appropriate. Mr McAllister thanked everyone for their participation and confirmed that the next meeting will be held in six months' time.