

FSA Chair's speech to the Global Food Regulators Summit, New Delhi

Professor Susan Jebb addressed the Global Food Regulators Summit (20-21 July 2023) in New Delhi, India, discussing innovation in global food standards. The summit was organised by the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, to share knowledge between global regulators.

Transcript as follows:

Thank you for the kind invitation to this very impressive summit for Global Food regulators and for your warm welcome and generous hospitality.

This meeting is very timely as the last few years have taught us that we live in a world of uncertainty. Many of us face political changes at home and the consequences of geopolitical changes beyond our own borders. Economic challenges mean it's harder for nations to protect the poorest, at home or abroad, while the global food system is being impacted by war and climate change.

But all of the difficulties of the last few years have only served to bring into sharp focus the continued importance of high food standards and the need for international cooperation.

I'm privileged to be the Chair of the UK FSA. We're an independent non-ministerial department that's responsible for protecting consumers' interests in relation to food. We are an £130 million regulator for a food industry worth £115 billion.

We have 1,400 staff protecting 60 million people across the UK plus all the other people around the world who enjoy UK food and look to us to uphold high food standards. Our mission is food you can trust. That means food that is safe, is what it says it is, and food that is healthier and more sustainable.

Our food standards are set out in law to stop the worst harms happening to consumers in relation to safety and authenticity. But to ensure they are effective we need them to be backed by responsible businesses and enforced against bad actors. Standards without enforcement are just guidance.

To make this work in a global food system we need to work with you, our global regulatory partners and with food businesses throughout the supply chain to keep food safe and protect consumers.

For the UK, EU Exit changed everything – and yet nothing – about food standards in the UK. We found ourselves out of the European regulatory system but carried over most of its regulations. Now we are doing it alone, we've had to develop systems to deliver these functions independently – and efficiently. We are having to be innovative.

Let me give you some examples.

First, scientific innovation

When I'm not at the FSA, I lead a research team at the University of Oxford, so you won't be surprised to hear that I think we need to look to science to help us keep food safe.

We are increasingly using whole genome sequencing to identify, and differentiate between, different bacterial and viral strains and to explore how foodborne pathogens and antimicrobial resistant microbes move between the environment, farms and food. This is going to be a very important tool to quickly identify and control the source of outbreaks.

This enabled us just last year to identify an outbreak of salmonella in Kinder eggs and other chocolate products manufactured by Ferrero in Belgium. This prompted a product recall across the UK and 98 other countries globally and prevented many children from getting ill from an outbreak largely affecting children under 5 years old.

But food safety is also about consumer behaviour. Our Kitchen Life project is a major ethnographic study of what people really do in their kitchens when they are storing, preparing and cooking food so we can better understand where the risks lie. Whilst self-reported data can be a useful indicator, it can present challenges; sometimes it's difficult to accurately report our own behaviour, so in this project we decided to directly observe human behaviour as people interact with food in their homes.

And some of the early findings are very concerning. We have seen tea towels used for handling raw fish being used to wipe down kitchen surfaces, chopping boards used for preparing raw chicken being reused without cleaning, fridges running too warm, and 'use-by' dates being ignored.

Second, we are using data analytics to make better use of existing data:

A good example of this is our work develop a modernised global approach for import controls.

Around 40 million tonnes of food are imported into the UK each year and the pattern of trade is changing. The UK has always been an outward looking country and as we continue to move forward as an independent trading nation, we are increasingly looking not just to Europe but also to the Rest of the World. The UK is already signing new Free Trade Agreements and we're keen to continue this, but we must ensure this food meets our standards.

Our new model for import checks, which will be introduced shortly, is based on data about the risk of a product and the country of origin. We want to minimise the barriers to trade while maintaining or improving public health outcomes.

We will continue to assess the suitability of imported food and feed controls to ensure we are protecting consumers from imported food risks, such as contaminants. All food and feed products entering the UK will need to have proportionate controls along the whole production and supply chain. And we will require health certification for products that may pose a higher risk, allowing for targeted checks at the border on products of concern.

In a similar way we're revising our system for checks on food at home. We've used data to develop a new dynamic system for food hygiene interventions at businesses. Rather than checks according to the date of the last inspection, we now use a data-led method based on intelligence about the risk posed by a business. This gives increased flexibility for risk rating a food establishment, including the use of remote assessments where appropriate. In our pilot study with the new model we found non-compliance in 26% of planned interventions, compared to 9% in the

control group.

Just to be clear in both cases, for imported and domestic food, this is not about fewer inspections, it's about targeting enforcement towards food presenting the greatest risk.

That leads to me my third point - working with and through others

As a regulator I'm clear that our job is to protect public health, but I also know that we are the final line of defence. In the first instance, it's the responsibility of food businesses to make sure the food they sell is safe and authentic. By understanding where the power lies in the food system we can work with and through influential businesses to drive change. Two examples:

Since the pandemic, almost 40% of households in the UK order takeaway food through an app or online and some 170,000 food businesses are listed on just three online delivery sites. These are companies that see themselves as logistics experts, not food businesses. But we've worked with three of the biggest operators – Just Eat, Uber Eats and Deliveroo – to develop a new Food Safety Charter.

This Charter commits them to make sure businesses selling food through their platforms are registered with their local authority and meet a minimum standard under the Food Hygiene Rating Scheme. It commits them to use their communication channels to businesses and customers to share FSA hygiene and safety information and support people with food hypersensitivities with appropriate information on allergens.

It's a voluntary scheme and we'd like them to go further, but it's a first step to agree some basic values and standards of behaviour. It's about shaping the culture in which they operate, it's about developing a shared vision for safe food.

We're also testing out some new approaches with six major supermarkets including Tesco and Sainsburys. These businesses have massive internal assurance systems in place to make sure all their stores are following the rules on food safety.

We want to test whether they could be regulated at an enterprise level, rather than treated as hundreds of standalone premises by local authorities. We are running a pilot, alongside their normal programme of planned inspections, so we can see if this approach can be done safely without any increase in risk.

But – to be clear – the emphasis on collaboration and cooperation in these examples does not mean we will not act swiftly if businesses don't do the right thing.

What next

Looking to the future, one of the key considerations for the FSA is our role in supporting Britain as a global trader. While the EU remains the UK's largest supplier of imported food, supplying more than 90% of all beef, dairy, eggs and pork products imported into the UK and 65% of all food and feed not of animal origin, we need to continue building new relationships with the rest of the world.

India is an important partner for the UK, and the UK Government is currently in negotiations for a new Free Trade Agreement between our countries, which could increase trade and benefit food producers on both sides. The UK and India share a common set of values. India is the world's largest democracy and has long maintained its support for international co-operation and democratic government. An agreement would further demonstrate the respective commitment to

this relationship, as well as boosting our trading relationship – already worth £36 billion in 2022.

The FSA will assist in the UK's Parliamentary scrutiny for Free Trade Agreements - providing advice on whether statutory protections for human health have been maintained.

And finally, I'm inspired by the leadership of Prime Minister Modi on food and the emphasis he is placing on the importance of health and sustainability which we heard about in the opening speeches.

I'd argue this is where we most need to innovate and evolve the way we work as Global Food Regulators. Health systems around the world are being compromised by diet-related ill health, especially the rise in obesity and related co-morbidities. At the same time agriculture accounts for a third of all greenhouse gas emissions.

Last month, the FSA's Science Council advised us that high temperatures and humidity could increase harmful fungi on many food crops. Algal blooms and water-borne diseases will also proliferate. Then there is water stress – 70% of all freshwater use is for agriculture. And let's not forget the risks to biodiversity – more than 75% of leading global crops rely to some extent on insect pollination for yields and quality.

I'd like to suggest that we need to innovate in relation to food standards, so they don't just protect us from acute harms as a result of food borne illnesses or contaminants in our food, but that standards also protect our longer-term health and the health of our incredible planet. That's going to require a whole new level of innovation and global cooperation.

If these things matter to you too, I hope we can talk more at this meeting and more importantly, I hope we can work together when we leave.