

Global harmonisation of food legislation: **the way forward**

There have been many food scares during the past 10 years. Examples are BSE, *Salmonella* in eggs, acrylamide, *Escherichia coli* O157:H7, avian influenza and foot-and-mouth disease. These scares have urged governments to tighten legislation. In the EU it led to Regulation (EC) 178/2002 (amended by (EC) 1642/2003) of which implementation started in 2002 and must be completed before 2007.

Although governments work together in organisations such as Codex Alimentarius and the World Trade Organisation (WTO), regrettably there are often differences in regulation between countries. The WTO recommends using international standards where they exist but also allows tougher standards if there is scientific justification. Serious concerns apply to the phrases 'where they exist' and 'scientific justification'. In such cases decisions may easily err on the extreme side and may lead to undue destruction of large amounts of food or provide serious barriers to trade.

In an attempt to eliminate these problems, the Food Science and Technology organisations in the USA and Europe, viz. the International Division of IFT, EFFoST and the Food Chemistry Division of FECS, intend to make an inventory of significant differences in legislation between countries on all continents and to produce recommendations to remove these differences, based on sound science and technology.

During IFT's Annual Meeting in July 2004 in Las Vegas, a symposium was devoted to the subject, covering food legislation in Asia, Europe, North America, South America, and Australia. Speakers explained the good intentions of governments and international organisations and the



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potential for dramatic failures, hampering new developments in food science and technology, in particular where the need for improvement is highest. Limits for contaminants, for example, are often based on detection limits rather than safety limits, and the difference between the two can be dramatic. New technologies face costs that are too high, because safety must be demonstrated in different ways, depending on country and/or region. Precautions, if too strict, may stop new, often highly desirable developments.

Following the symposium in Las Vegas two working parties were set up. Dr. Gustavo Barbosa-Cánovas of the Washington State University will chair the working party on legislation with respect to food processing and Lulu Kurman of Mead Johnson Nutritionals agreed to temporarily chair the working party dealing with all aspects of product composition. Larry Keener and Huub Lelieveld agreed to coordinate and facilitate the activities. The working parties will start with expanding membership principally through sister organisations around the world, also using the services of IUFoST, of which IFT and EFFoST are regional member organisations. The intention is to involve as many nations as possible and to obtain scientific

consensus among all of them on issues identified. The second task therefore is to identify issues that need to be prioritised. Subsequently, working parties will be formed to deal with specific issues, and statements will be drafted for perusal by members. It will take time, but the intended result is a scientific consensus recommendation to be presented to regulators in all nations.

Although most of the work will be done by correspondence, there is no doubt that there will be many issues that need debate. In addition, intermediate results need to be presented to the public. Therefore, workshops will be organised. The first one will be held in April 2005, hosted by Michele Buchanan of Unilever Foodsolutions in Lisle, Chicago and past chair of the IFT Committee on Global Interests and US delegate to IUFoST. The second one will be hosted by Prof. Hans Steinhart of the University of Hamburg, Germany, in conjunction with the annual meeting and conference of the Food Chemistry Division of FECS, EuroFoodChem XIII, in September 2005. Dr. Paul Bartels, of Wageningen University & Research, and member of the Executive Committee of EFFoST, will coordinate the European side of these activities.

If the subject is of interest to you and you want to actively participate in the effort, please send an email to one of the addressees below.

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