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CONFERENCE PAPER

A MECHANISM FOR THE EXCHANGE OF OFFICIAL INFORMATION ON FOOD SAFETY, ANIMAL AND PLANT HEALTH

FAO

Overview

This paper describes an FAO initiative to provide a single mechanism - the Biosecurity Portal - for the exchange of official information on food safety, animal and plant health, as related to the FAO mandate. Information will be provided from national and international agencies maintaining 'ownership' of the information. FAO will provide the mechanism and technical support for the Portal so that official information can be made available and readily accessed in a coordinated way. Examples of the type of information that could be accessible via the Biosecurity Portal are given, as is the likely technical assistance that FAO could provide to facilitate this. Access to the Biosecurity Portal will be widely available and free, although certain areas may be developed with restricted access limited to Member countries. It is Internet based to ensure wide usage and cost effectiveness.

1. Introduction

Public concerns and awareness over food-borne illnesses, plant health and animal health are increasing, and sanitary and phytosanitary issues are becoming increasingly complex and rigorous due to globalization. Many countries are struggling to keep pace with changes due to globalization factors, rapid advances in technology, and often lack access to basic information essential for food safety, animal health and plant health. Access to such official information is of paramount importance for countries to protect human health, agriculture and the environment. Such information is necessary to ensure safe trade and traffic.

The WTO Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS Agreement) and the Agreement on Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT Agreement), respectively, establish that members shall ensure that any sanitary or phytosanitary measure is applied only to the extent necessary to protect human, animal or plant life or health, and is based on scientific principles. Having easy access to relevant international standards and to reliable up-to-date information about the sanitary and phytosanitary legislation, regulations and the sanitary and phytosanitary conditions of other countries and relevant scientific information creates a common ground for determining equivalency and assessing risk.

At the same time, as the need for relevant information has increased, access to such information has become more problematic. The proliferation of digital information sources, advances in computing systems, and the continuing Internet networking and communications revolution have caused the creation of information to outpace our ability to organize, search and access it. Therefore, FAO sees an urgent need for a mechanism by which the relevant information already available is accessible in a systematic manner and made available to all interested parties in a transparent way, using modern information and communication technologies.

2. Biosecurity and Agriculture

Food safety, animal health, and plant health are the three sectors which fall within the concept of biosecurity. Biosecurity encompasses all policy and regulatory frameworks (including instruments and activities) to manage risks associated with food and agriculture (including relevant environmental risks), including fisheries and forestry. These sectors include food production in relation to food safety, the introduction of plant pests, animal pests and diseases, and zoonoses, the introduction and release of Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) and their products, and the introduction and safe management of invasive alien species and genotypes.

Recent developments in biosecurity in food and agriculture include the tendency toward integration of and cooperation across sectors. Internationally, this tendency is demonstrated in the WTO Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS Agreement), and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and its Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety¹. It is further addressed in the FAO/WHO Codex Alimentarius, the International Plant Protection Convention (IPPC) and the FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries. Nationally, this is shown by the recent tendency for the integration and institutionalization of the three sectors, namely food safety, plant life and health, and animal life and health e.g. the MAF Biosecurity Authority in New Zealand, Biosecurity Australia in Australia, and the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) the United Kingdom.

The more obvious common components in biosecurity include risk analysis, international standard setting, capacity building, surveillance and monitoring, and the exchange of information. The rest of this paper will concentrate on the exchange of biosecurity information.

¹ The term biosafety is used in the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety where it refers to the safe transfer, handling and use of living modified organisms possessing a novel combination of genetic material obtained through the use of modern biotechnology.

3. The FAO Biosecurity Portal

Within the context of the biosecurity initiative in FAO, an electronic information exchange mechanism (i.e. the Biosecurity Portal) has been established and is currently being developed by FAO and relevant biosecurity partners. This is a major initiative that will include the various international agencies and partners involved in food safety, animal and plant health. Some of these partnerships are already in the process of being developed (e.g. with the Office International des Epizooties (OIE), the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Convention for Biological Diversity (CBD) Secretariat) and others will be developed in the near future.

FAO provides the neutral forum that is essential for all Member Nations to contribute and benefit from this initiative on an equal basis. The neutrality of FAO and that of other relevant international agencies will ensure the necessary credibility for wider participation in the Biosecurity Portal. International co-operation is essential for meeting global and national goals of improving food safety and agricultural health. FAO will be responsible for the co-ordinated management of the shared resources and responsibilities of the programme.

Member Nations will be able to follow the progress in the developments of the Biosecurity Portal through the intergovernmental process of the different programmes of FAO, such as IPPC, Codex Alimentarius, animal health, and biosecurity in relation to Fisheries and Forestry.

FAO's contribution will also address the issue of quality of information access, focusing on criteria such as accessibility, retrievability, timeliness, efficient workflow, consistency, language coverage, participation, navigation, preservation of information resources, and security of information. This will be done by ensuring the Portal provides the services required by the Members and engaging Members in the development of the Web site.

The main users of the Biosecurity Portal will be national institutions and regional organizations involved in food safety, animal and plant health, and those authorities involved in food and agricultural trade. However, a wide range of other users may benefit from the information and data to be provided through the Biosecurity Portal, including industry, scientists, students, private and civil society organizations (NGOs), and the media. Access to the Biosecurity Portal will be free to all. However, certain parts of the Portal may be restricted to Members access only due to confidentiality issues and trade sensitive information.

4. Development and Content

This Biosecurity Portal will provide a portal, or single access point, for official national and international information on food quality and safety, plant health, and animal health. The data will be maintained as a collaborative effort between national and multilateral partners, each in their respective areas of authority and expertise.

Member Nations would be responsible for data entry through a process of secure remote access (i.e. passwords). While the information to be provided through the Biosecurity Portal would primarily be available electronically through Internet and CD-ROM, a synthesis of this information would be made available periodically in hard copy for distribution to those who have neither access to Internet nor to CD-ROM.

The following table gives an indication of the type of information that could be accessible via the Biosecurity Portal. It is important to note that national authorities, and other relevant and authorized regional or international agencies, will provide the official information accessible through the Biosecurity Portal.

International sanitary and phytosanitary standards:

- ? international food standards,
- ? animal health standards, and
- ? international standards for phytosanitary measures;

International scientific evaluations:

- ? food additives, and chemical contaminants and toxins in food,
- ? veterinary drugs (JECFA),
- ? pesticide residues (JMPR), and
- ? microbiological contaminants;

National legislation and regulations:

- ? food safety,
- ? animal health, and
- ? plant health;

International and national alert/reporting systems:

- ? food- and feed-borne infections and intoxications,
- ? occurrence, introduction and outbreak of plant and animal diseases and pests,
- ? introduction of marine and inland water species, and
- ? aquaculture-related fish food safety problems;

Official scientific material:

- ? national risk analyses and other national scientific evaluations (e.g., of food additives, contaminants, toxins, veterinary drugs, pesticide residues; genetically modified foods; irradiated foods; microbiological contaminants; animal or plant diseases or pests etc),
- ? methodologies for risk analysis,
- ? methods of analysis, and
- ? survey methodology, etc.;

Official contact points and related other official information;

- ? national official contact points, and
- ? references laboratories;

Biosecurity related information:

- ? information concerning other sources,
- ? links, and
- ? activities and news.

All information will, as necessary, include disclaimers with regard to ownership and reliability. Ownership and liability for information remain with the provider of the information.

5. FAO technical assistance

Since its founding in 1945, FAO has had at the heart of its mandate a responsibility to provide its Members with technical advice and assistance related to agricultural production and trade in food and agricultural products. Consequently, FAO provides scientific and technical expertise on a wide range of agricultural and food related topics. In line with its mandate and the three major areas of its programme, which include providing information, providing a forum for international debate for issues related to food and agriculture, and rendering technical assistance to its Member Nations, FAO seeks, within its means and resources, to help countries realize the positive impact of food safety and agricultural health (including the utilization of biotechnology and to minimize possible negative effects).

It is envisaged that technical assistance will play a key role in developing the Biosecurity Portal with Members and ensuring developing country participation. In terms of information exchange, FAO's technical assistance is likely to be provided in the following areas:

- development of national strategies for the exchange of official information on biosecurity, specifically food safety issues;
- training and manpower development for participation in the Biosecurity Portal;
- awareness and understanding of information exchange obligations through international treaties, agreements and conventions;
- assistance in programme development;
- institutional infrastructure and capacity;
- assistance in the development of information exchange facilities;
- assistance in systems management;
- facilitation of technical cooperation between institutions and governments;
- training sessions for national authorities on the use of the Biosecurity Portal and data input;
- tailored training sessions to targeted audiences on the use of the Biosecurity Portal; and
- participation in the global exchange of official biosecurity information.

Many developing countries, and some countries in transition, lack the capacity (both technology and infrastructure) to meet their international obligations with respect to the exchange of information on food safety and agricultural health. Technical assistance through FAO to help these countries strengthen national food control, animal and plant health information systems is foreseen. However, significant additional resources will be required from relevant national and international partners. Such partnerships are already in the process of being developed and the inter-agency development programme needs to be expanded further.

6. Concluding remarks

The success of Biosecurity Portal will necessitate national and international participation in both the development and implementation of this information exchange mechanism. Such coordination and participation is likely to involve a great deal of work, commitment and resources. However, a successful, effective and functional Biosecurity Portal would ensure the

framework in which national authorities can meet their international biosecurity information exchange obligations, improve transparency, facilitate trade, and assist countries in ensuring that consumers have confidence in the quality and safety of the food supply, regardless of its origin, while protecting animal and plant life and health.

7. Recommendations

Conference participants are invited to:

- 7.1 *View* the Biosecurity Portal and *make suggestions and recommendations* to ensure the Portal meets the needs of users for the exchange of official biosecurity information;
- 7.2 *Urge* relevant national authorities or inter-governmental organizations participate in developing the Biosecurity Portal;
- 7.3 *Urge* relevant national authorities or inter-governmental organizations utilize this system as per their mandate; and
- 7.4 *Consider* the benefits of providing and sharing national information in this way and using the Biosecurity Portal as the preferred / primary mechanism for the exchange of official food safety, animal and plant health information.

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