



JOINT FAO/WHO FOOD STANDARDS PROGRAMME

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FOOD SAFETY AND QUALITY SITUATION IN THE COUNTRIES OF THE REGION: CURRENT AND EMERGING ISSUES IN THE REGION

(Prepared by FAO and WHO)

FOOD SAFETY AND QUALITY IN THE REGION

1. Introduction and background

Food technologies and food control systems are evolving at a rapid pace and members need to continue to be aware of and address issues in a timely and effective manner. A priority list of emerging issues expected to have an impact on food safety in region in the next 5-10 years was identified through a survey among members at the 15th session of CCNASWP. Moreover, since the last session of CCNASWP in September 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected all members of the region and also influenced their ability to control food safety. Codex was also not immune to the effects of the pandemic and quickly adapted to the new circumstances by conducting its work virtual during this period, thereby ensuring continued the development of food standards in a timely manner. This paper provides a brief overview of the food safety and quality situation in the region since the last CCNASWP meeting.

2. Emerging issues expected to have an impact on food safety in region in the next 5-10 years

A 2019 survey (see appendix 1 for further details) on emerging issues expected to have an impact on food safety and quality in the next 5 to 10 years among Codex Members in the region identified the following issues of highest interest:

- Limited support to manage food regulatory systems (22%);
- Climate change (13%);
- Innovative food technologies (9%);
- Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) (9%);
- Limited National Codex Committee (NCC) support mechanisms (9%);
- Risk communication (9%);
- Increased foodborne disease transmission (9%);
- Pesticides residues on food crops (MRLs) (9%);

Additional emerging issues identified in the survey included veterinary drugs residues (4%); antimicrobial resistance (4%); and human and environmental health risk from foreign food waste (4%). Strengthening laboratory capacities, hazard assessments in food supply and value chains and improving food safety in fresh food markets were also areas identified in national and regional consultations. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) commissioned and delivered a major risk assessment of Group B *Streptococcus* (GBS) sequence type 283 (ST283) in freshwater fish in 2021.¹ In 2022, FAO organized the first ever global consultation on the safety of cell-based foods.²

The committee invites Members to comment on the continuing relevance of these topics and to identify any new emerging issues for inclusion in the list.

¹ <https://www.fao.org/3/cb5067en/cb5067en.pdf>

² <https://www.fao.org/asiapacific/news/detail-events/en/c/1615420/>

3. Food safety during the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic had presented unprecedented challenges to a range of stakeholders in the food system. At international level, supply chains and international trade suffered disruptions and in many countries, lockdowns affected the ability of food business operators (FBOs) and competent authorities to continue conducting routine food control functions and activities in accordance with national regulations and international recommendations.

To this end, FAO and the World Health Organization (WHO) developed a series of guidance and events related to COVID-19 to assist countries in their endeavor to maintain the safety of the food supply. These include a range of Policy Briefs and guidance for various stakeholders in the food system on topics across the farm to fork continuum, as exemplified below:

[Food safety in the time of COVID-19;](#)

[Guidelines to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on livestock production and animal health;](#)

[COVID-19 and Food Safety: Guidance for competent authorities responsible for national food safety control systems \(FAO and WHO\), interim guidance;](#)

[COVID-19: Guidance for preventing transmission of COVID-19 within food businesses;](#)

[FAO COVID-19 Response and Recovery Programme - Trade and food safety standards;](#)

[The effect of COVID-19 on fisheries and aquaculture in Asia;](#)

[Exposure of humans or animals to SARS-CoV-2 from wild, livestock, companion and aquatic animals;](#)

[Build back better in a post-COVID-19 world – Reducing future wildlife-borne spillover of disease to humans;](#)

[Reducing public health risks associated with the sale of live wild animals of mammalian species in traditional food markets: interim guidance](#)

[Virtual Roundtables: Advancing the Implementation of the Regional Framework for Action on Food Safety in the Western Pacific, Virtual meeting, 16, 18, 22, 26 and 29 March 2021: meeting report](#)

[Workshop: Regulatory and Food Safety Aspects of Alternative Proteins for Conventional Animal Products, Virtual meeting, 19-20 May 2021: meeting report](#)

[Biregional Advocacy Meeting on Risk Mitigation in Traditional Food Markets in the Asia Pacific Region, Manila, Philippines, 1-2 September 2021: meeting report](#)

4. Regional Food Safety Conference: Food safety in the era of COVID-19

Similar to Codex going virtual, capacity development and information exchange also utilized virtual means. A regional food safety conference themed “Food safety in the era of COVID-19 – earning consumers’ trust” was convened by FAO from 17 to 26 November 2020 in Bangkok, Thailand.³

The conference created a forum for in-depth discussions on food control systems in the region and existing and emerging food safety issues. It covered traditional topics such as food safety standards; science-based evidence generation; risk-based prioritization as well as emerging subjects such as responsible use and transparency of new technologies and production systems and risk communication in the era of social media.

The conference emphasized the critical need for pre-requisite food safety programmes such as those offering good hygiene practices for food handling which are at the core of the response to COVID-19. It underlined the need for a concerted region-wide effort to promote food safety standards and Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) measures as well as the need for greater investments in new technologies and digitalization. Concerted efforts on food safety would not only help countries mitigate the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic, but also boost their resilience for the long term by facilitating and accelerating food and agricultural trade, preventing the next zoonotic pandemic and transforming food systems.

5. World Food Safety Day observance

FAO, the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), the World Organization for Animal Health (WOAH), the World Food Programme (WFP) and WHO jointly observed the World Food Safety Day (WFSDD) every year through the organization of a knowledge sharing webinar on topical issues within food safety. In 2020, the webinar was held in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and structured around continuous and new food safety actions in the new normal.⁴ ⁵In 2021, the webinar focused on the holistic “One Health” approach for food safety, which recognizes the connection between the health of people, animals and the environment and the impact on food

³ <https://www.fao.org/3/cb3863en/cb3863en.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.fao.org/3/cb0481en/CB0481EN.pdf>

safety. In 2022, the theme was multi-sectoral actions for food safety in the region. This included the delivery of practical messages linking the outcomes of the Food System Summit 2021 to improving food safety; highlighting the importance of improving hygiene and sanitation in traditional food markets in the region for supply of safe, fresh, affordable and healthy food; and understanding better the roles and responsibilities of various stakeholders in promoting safe food. Governments, the private sector, civil society, academia and development partners participated in the webinars and provided their insights on emerging issues.

6. Tonga Volcanic eruption

The volcanic eruption in the Tongan archipelago on January 15th 2022 was the largest recorded since Krakatoa in 1883 and triggered tsunami waves of up to 15 metres in height. While there were few direct casualties, up to 85% of the population was affected, with ashfall accounting for much of the damage. Ash from volcanic eruptions often contains toxic chemicals that can enter the food supply through contact with crops, animals grazing in fields where ash has fallen, and contaminated water. In an effort to prevent potential consumer ill-health caused by contaminants entering the food chain, FAO rapidly developed guidance [10 facts EVERYONE should know about food safety and volcanic ash fall ([English](#); [Tongan](#))] for the Tongan authorities to communicate with stakeholders about risks and control measures. WHO maintained close coordination with the health cluster and food safety cluster during the response in order to ensure timely actions to support the Member State.

7. WHO and FAO Food Safety Strategies

Regional Framework for Action on Food Safety in the Western Pacific

In 2017, the WHO Regional Committee endorsed the [Regional Framework for Action on Food Safety in the Western Pacific](#), to be implemented from 2018 to 2025. The WHO Regional Office for the Western Pacific Region intend to promote safe food for all and protect people's health by advancing food safety systems so Member States are able to manage food safety risks and respond to food safety incidents.

The following five interrelated core components are fundamental for providing a strong foundation for food safety systems:

- Food safety policy and legal frameworks;
- Risk-based food inspection and enforcement;
- Food safety information underpinning evidence;
- Food safety incident and emergency response;
- Food safety communications and education.

WHO Global Strategy for Food Safety

The [WHO Global Strategy for Food Safety \(2022-2030\)](#) was approved by the 3rd World Health Assembly in May 2022. It is intended to guide and support WHO Member States in their efforts to prioritize, plan, implement, monitor, and regularly evaluate actions toward mitigating foodborne illnesses by strengthening food safety systems and promoting global cooperation.

The Global Strategy for Food Safety's five strategic priorities are based on the fundamental components/infrastructure of the food safety systems:

- Strategic priority 1 : Strengthening national food controls systems.
- Strategic priority 2: Identifying and responding to food safety challenges resulting from the transformation and global changes in food systems transformation.
- Strategic priority 3: Increasing the use of food chain information, scientific evidence and risk assessment in making risk management decisions.
- Strategic priority 4: Strengthening stakeholder engagement and risk communication; and
- Strategic priority 5: Promoting food safety as an essential component in domestic, regional and international trade.

Strategic Priorities for Food Safety within the FAO Strategic Framework 2022-31⁶

In July 2022, the 28th Session of the Committee on Agriculture (COAG) endorsed the proposed Strategic Priorities for Food Safety within the FAO Strategic Framework 2022-31. Based on comments and guidance received the document was refined and considered by the 134th Session of the Programme Committee in November 2022, and subsequently endorsed by the FAO Council at its 171st Session in December 2022.

⁶ <https://www.fao.org/3/nj925en/nj925en.pdf>

FAO's Strategic Priorities for its work on food safety, result from an iterative consultative process led by the Organization with its Members and international partner organizations, including, notably WHO. These Strategic Priorities are articulated around four Strategic Outcomes:

- Intergovernmental and intersectoral coordination of food safety governance is reinforced at all levels;
- Sound scientific advice and evidence are provided as the foundation for food safety decision-making;
- National food control systems are further strengthened and are continuously improved; and
- Public and private stakeholder collaboration is promoted to ensure food safety management and controls throughout agrifood systems.

These Strategic Priorities encourage a more consistent integration of food safety in the development of sustainable and inclusive agrifood systems, food security and nutrition policies, and agriculture development strategies.

Appendix I – Summary of emerging issues expected to have an impact on food safety in region in the next 5-10 years

The table below contains a summary of the issues noted by the respondent countries in decreasing order of frequency.

Category	Description of the problem
Limited capacity to manage food regulatory systems	<p>Members noted the weak enforcement of food control systems, food recall mechanisms, and lack of public awareness contribute to the prevalence of food safety concerns.</p> <p>Regulators face challenges managing street food vendors' activities.</p> <p>Food labelling remain problematic as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Countries are importing foods in foreign languages, • Consumers have little knowledge on the importance of labelling, • Many important foodstuffs are almost reaching their expiry dates with many being sold after their recommended expiry dates, some local food suppliers have no labels on their products. <p>Member states requested support on Food safety policy and legal frameworks related to reinforcement of the multisectoral approach and collaboration; the inclusion of the One Health concept and strengthening national food safety control systems in national policies and regulations; and promote collaborative strategies for exchanging best practices in formulating policies and legislation among countries of the region and experts.</p>
Climate Change	<p>Regional countries are concerned that climate change will impact on hazards in the food supply chain, lead to introduction of new foodborne pests and diseases and present a lot of challenges for many small island states.</p> <p>Some members are listed as the most vulnerable nations in the world due to other natural calamities, and the effects of climate change on their food security and food safety systems present some of the biggest challenges to their livelihood.</p>
Increased foodborne disease transmission	<p>CCNASWP members noted that Increasing globalisation of the food supply chain will possibly increase the risks of transmission of foodborne viruses to naïve populations e.g. Hepatitis A Virus (HAV) in frozen minimally processed produce and/or the increased magnifications of issues if they do occur; e.g. <i>Listeria monocytogenes</i> in frozen vegetables.</p> <p>The members emphasized that new foodborne pathogens (not previously recognized as foodborne, viruses in particular) or "old" pathogens in unexpected foods will impact on food safety and human health. A special emphasis was made on <i>Campylobacter</i>, which has long proven a difficult pathogen to prevent and control in meat and poultry products.</p> <p>In addition, member from the Pacific Islands, during the virtual roundtables, requested support on Risk-based food inspection and enforcement in terms of focusing on import activities and support on developing/improving a plan for food safety incident and emergency response and recall systems as well as simulation exercises.</p>
Risk Communication	<p>Members expressed that food safety risk communication with consumers remains problematic in this rapidly changing digital world. Social media is influencing consumer consumption patterns which is leading to health deterioration.</p> <p>Regarding food safety communication and education, Members agreed the needs for risk communication plans and materials and support on the development of policies/plans/guidelines for Food Safety Communication.</p>
Limited NCC Support Mechanisms	<p>Some governments in the region are not providing enough support to the work of Codex and food safety. The NCCs only meet on an ad hoc basis and need to be strengthened.</p> <p>Members to the NCC need to be selected from all relevant stakeholders.</p>
Non-communicable diseases	<p>The region of the CCNASWP has some of the highest rates of NCDs in the world. Members are raising the concern about the change in eating habits and consumption of low-grade nutritional poor imported foods are contributing to this prevalence in the region.</p> <p>The NCD problems is contributes to up to 80 % of deaths in some of these island nations and it takes up approximately 70 % of national health budgets. The NCD problem is also affecting school-aged children.</p> <p>Some of the current food regulations are out of date and do not address the current NCD problems.</p>

Innovative Food Technologies	<p>Members noted that cellular agriculture is an emerging field which includes many foods safety challenge and labelling considerations. New ways addressing these problems must be developed, and digitalization could present such an opportunity to combat the emerging issues in food safety.</p> <p>Related to food safety information underpinning evidence members requested to improve food consumption data collection and reinforce food analysis laboratory capacities.</p>
Pesticide Residues on Food Crops (MRLs)	<p>Members raised concerns on the wide use of pesticides and herbicides in food crop production systems to manage insect pests, diseases and weeds. Pesticides could be the hidden cause of self-poisoning as they are intrinsically toxic and deliberately spread in the environment and no strict regulation and control are observed in some member states.</p>
Antimicrobial Resistance	<p>Antimicrobial resistance (AMR) is becoming an increasing health risk and members are concerned about its impact on their citizens. The region is calling for strengthening surveillance systems and scaling up surveillance activities and oversight of antimicrobial prescribing and use in countries to determine the scale and impact of the problem and to ensure responsible use of antimicrobials.</p>
Veterinary Drugs Residues (MRLs)	<p>The region is concerned about veterinary drug residues in animals and antibiotics in animal feed, both of which ultimately end up in the human food chain. Members are calling for tighter regulatory frameworks to monitor the use of veterinary drugs and antibiotics in animals.</p>
Human and Environmental Health Risk from Foreign Food Waste	<p>Members are concerned that the smaller member states are ill equipped to manage food wastes from aircrafts and cruise ships. The waste could cause foodborne disease etc., and represent a new health and environmental risk to the concerned states.</p> <p>During the Virtual Roundtables in 2021, regarding the specific context of Pacific island countries and areas, such as food import controls, food testing capacity, food-related noncommunicable disease risk factors and food safety issues associated with climate change, it was mentioned that regional cooperation would enable access to food safety reference laboratories with the necessary capacity and would also share data with the Codex Alimentarius Commission and global databases related to food safety and nutrition.</p>