codex alimentarius commission

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THE INTERNATIONAL PORTAL FOR FOOD SAFETY, ANIMAL AND PLANT HEALTH
(Submission from FAO)

INTRODUCTION

1. FAO has led an interagency initiative - with CBD, OIE, WHO and WTO - to develop and maintain an internet-based portal - **the International Portal on Food Safety, Animal and Plant Health** - to allow users to search for current standards, regulations and other official materials relevant to the WTO SPS agreement from a single access point: http://www.ipfsaph.org.

2. The 2004 Codex Alimentarius Commission Information paper (CAC27/INF4) provides background information on the objectives and design considerations behind the system.

3. The portal has now been 'live' since May 2004. This paper describes the achievements during this first year of operation, and outlines plans to exploit the system to improve national capacity to address SPS issues in the period 2005-2007.

ABOUT THE SYSTEM

4. The portal currently (June 2005) contains over 21,000 records which link to the following types of content:

   - International and national standards, official guidelines and recommended codes of practice
   - Notifications
   - National legislation and regulations
   - Risk analyses, including from JECFA, JMPR, and JEMRA
   - Maximum Residue Limits- from Codex and available national sources
   - National contact points for Codex, IPPC, OIE, WTO SPS and CBD

5. The portal has effectively become a means of viewing the core data of the Codex website alongside 25 other relevant data sets maintained by CBD, FAO, IAEA, IPPC, OIE, WHO and WTO as well as national sources (from the US, EU, and other smaller datasets from other countries). The site is navigable in English, French and Spanish, with the documents available in their original language. Content is updated on a monthly basis (as required), and new data sets are added as they become available.

6. To address the issue of limited internet bandwidth availability in some developing countries, a version of the portal has been prepared in the form of a searchable CD-ROM catalogue. The CD allows users to search the site offline, only going online when they actually want to download a document which is not available on the CD (all main Codex, IPPC, and OIE texts are also available on the CD). This CD has been tested (first in India) and 500 copies were distributed during May-June 2005, through a news story on the main FAO webpage.

7. Usage figures for the system have been very encouraging. The number of daily page views (excluding crawlers) has increased from an early average of 5,000 per day (July 2004) to around 13,000 (May 2005). Over 600 documents are downloaded each day. The site is receiving a growing number of queries to the webmaster account and the helpdesk (general query) feature. The site registered a recent peak of 50,000 page views in a 12 hour period following a news story on the portal on a Spanish language food safety site.

8. Analysis of usage indicates a number of different patterns of use. Some users utilize the site because it is more friendly than the source site – they look for something which they suspect is published by a given organization, but cannot find on the original site, so they search using a precise document or reference number. On the other hand, some users tend to search for general topics (standards), or for cross-cutting issues ("humidity control"). Both yield useful results. The portal also provides a powerful full text searching ability that can easily retrieve documents and reports including the name of a specific compound or chemical of interest.

PROMOTION AND PARTNERSHIPS

9. The portal is a practical tool which can be used by researchers, policy makers, the private sector and others to answer a wide range of SPS-related questions. The portal helps:

    - build awareness of key international standards, as well as the measures used by others to implement them, among officials responsible for these domains; and

    - increase awareness of the market access requirements applied by actual or potential trading partners.

10. Because of the finite resources available, attempting to reach a broad set of potential users inevitably requires collaboration through partnerships with other agencies, involving:

    - participation on programmes run by others;

    - preparing materials for others to deliver; or

    - publishing links in training materials of others.

11. To illustrate, the following are some examples of promotion and partnerships achieved thus far:

    - the project team has collaborated with the Geneva-based trade promotion agencies in the Joint Integrated Technical Assistance Programme for Africa (JITAP), briefing national inquiry points (Geneva, December 2004 and Uganda, February 2005) and undertaking training sessions with SPS inquiry points as part of JITAP missions (Tunisia, March 2005);

    - the portal team has also supplied training materials for others to deliver regarding the use of the portal to address national SPS issues (WTO SPS workshops, India, May 2005); and

    - third party training such as the World Bank Institute e-learning course on SPS issues includes links to the portal.

12. In the terminology used by the Millennium Development Goals (and MDG 8 in particular) the portal is a small scale practical example of a "global partnership for development", contributing in substance to an open (transparent) rules-based trading system. The project team is actively seeking other opportunities for partnerships with projects, programmes or institutions.

EXPLOITING THE PORTAL – PLANS FOR 2005/2007

13. In addition to increasing the use of the system, countries can actively participate by making their own legislation, regulations or other official information available to the portal. By doing so, countries can promote transparency and demonstrate national good governance on food safety, animal health and/or plant health issues.

14. The philosophy behind this work is always to enhance and integrate existing locally-managed data sources rather than require additional work (either locally or centrally) for documents to be uploaded to the portal. In previous initiatives, the latter has not proved sustainable, and such data sets quickly become out of date.

15. Pilot work has been funded by the Standards and Trade Development Facility (STDF) with Turkey and Uganda; in the case of the former, new translations are being made available on the official Turkish language website, accessible through the portal. Two regional workshops involving these countries and their key regional trading partners are planned for the autumn of 2005.

16. One additional useful benefit of this work is that the **process** of identifying materials for inclusion in the portal can help highlight gaps and outstanding issues in the regulatory framework within the country, which links into FAO's prototype methodology for assessing Biosecurity Capacity needs.

17. To illustrate, initial data gathering requires the following steps:

- run a workshop for all involved in producing or using SPS-related information relevant to the country (the objective is to demonstrate the portal, identify major sources, responsibilities for maintenance, and highlight local *Biosecurity* issues)

- compile an inventory of all relevant food safety, animal and plant health regulations by interviewing local responsible authorities;

- collect information on existing digital content, including responsibility for maintenance, and identify any key texts which are not available electronically;

- plan and carry out tasks needed to make this information available (digitising, adding additional metadata to websites, etc); and

- harvest information from national sources, and publicise the availability of newly-posted information with key trading partners.

NEXT STEPS

18. The next steps planned for the development of the portal are as follows:

- further promotion and partnership activities with other agencies, also extending to general economic, as well as specialized regional bodies, in Africa and Latin America;

- inclusion of further data on SPS requirements from (up to 8 additional) major import markets in Asia and Latin America, along with refinement of existing EU and US data sets;

- targeted work with (up to 15) developing countries to exploit the potential of the portal, by including the system as a core component on all SPS-related capacity building project work funded by FAO, STDF and the WTO SPS Secretariat; and

- continued awareness and fund-raising work to secure these planned activities for the period 2006-2007.

19. For a discussion on promoting the portal or on capacity building activities associated with SPS-related information management, please contact:

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