FAO GM Foods Platform

Meeting Report

Side event to the 36th Codex Alimentarius Commission

Launch of the FAO GM Foods Platform

On 1 July 2013, FAO organized a side event to the 36th Codex Alimentarius Commission at the FAO headquarters in Rome, Italy. The meeting started at 13.00 hours and ended at 15.00 hours. The final meeting agenda is attached as Annex 1. Approximately 120 people attended the side event; however, owing to the limited capacity of the meeting room, only 81 participants were able to remain in the room and sign the list of participants, attached as Annex 2.

1. Welcoming remarks

Mr Steve Crossley (Senior Officer, FAO)

The meeting was officially opened by Mr Steve Crossly. He stated that, whereas food security is at the heart of the FAO mandate, food safety and quality of food are of course implicit components of that mandate. However, ensuring food safety to protect public health and promote economic development remains a significant challenge in both developing and developed countries.

Mr Crossley explained that FAO works to assist its member countries, particularly developing countries, to reap the benefits derived from the application of biotechnologies in agriculture, forestry and fisheries. This is done through provision of technical information and assistance, including the development of capacities to make risk- and science-based decisions. FAO also provides technical advice for the establishment of appropriate regulatory frameworks in the fields of biosafety and food safety. The FAO tool *GM food safety assessment: Tools*

for trainers was developed in 2008 to facilitate training activities for this purpose. Mr Crossley then explained the relationship between the Codex Commission's agreement to adopt Annex III of the Codex Plant Guidelines, entitled *Guideline for the conduct of food safety assessment of foods derived from recombinant-DNA plants*, in 2008 and the new FAO GM Foods Platform. Finally, Mr Crossley announced the official launch of the FAO GM Foods Platform (http://fao.org/gm-platform).

2. Introduction of the Panel Members and an invited speaker

Dr Masami T. Takeuchi introduced five panel members to the floor: Dr Paul Mayers (Canada), Dr Mike Wehr (USA), Dr Paul Brent (Australia), Dr Marilia Nutti (Brazil) and Dr Martin Lema (Argentina), who participated via video-streaming. Dr Takeuchi appreciated their time and commitment to the work related to the Platform. She also introduced the day's invited speaker, Prof. Hiroshi Yoshikura, and thanked him for his valuable input as a member of the Informal Network.

3. Introduction to FAO and FAO's work in the area of food safety
Dr Masami T. Takeuchi (Food Safety Officer, FAO)

Dr Masami T. Takeuchi first reminded the audience of the FAO's mandate: "Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food" (FAO World Food Summit, 1996). Following this, she explained the FAO's work in the area of food safety. There are four main groups in the Food Safety and Codex Unit: Codex Alimentarius Secretariat, Capacity Development, Emergency Prevention and Provision of Scientific Advice. Dr Takeuchi explained that the FAO GM Foods Platform has been developed on the basis of the Codex agreement, and therefore the Provision of Scientific Advice group is following up on the work. She introduced the next speaker, who planned to discuss further the agreement that was reached at the Codex Alimentarius Commission in 2008. The presentation is available at:
http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/agns/pdf/topics/Side_Event_Platform_Intro.pdf.

4. Background for FAO to develop and maintain an information-sharing platform for safety assessment of foods derived from recombinant-DNA plant materials
Prof. Hiroshi Yoshikura (Former Chair of the Codex TFFBT)

Prof Hiroshi Yoshikura first presented the Scope of Annex III of the Codex *Guidelines for the conduct of food safety assessment from recombinant-DNA plants*. This comprises Section 1: acknowledgement of asymmetric authorizations and consequent LLP situation; Section 2:

recommendations for food safety assessment in an LLP situation; and Section 3: data and information sharing to facilitate utilization of the Annex III. Prof. Yoshikura emphasized the importance of information sharing on the safety assessment of foods derived from r-DNA plants, as agreed in: 1. Paragraphs 27 and 28: (i) Members should have access to requisite data and information, (ii) Members should make information available in a database maintained by FAO; and 2. Content of Information: paragraph 28, bullet points a) to j).

After this, Prof Yoshikura introduced some key issues debated in relation to the FAO Database: 1. The EC proposed a link to BCH but this was rejected because (i) it does not focus on food safety and (ii) not all Codex members are party to a CP (paras 93–94, 7th TF); 2. Unique Identifier (para 28 of the Annex): this was accepted on the condition that OECD BioTrack is not referenced even as a footnote (para. 97, 7th TF); 3. The EC proposed the addition of a Structured Summary of Risk Assessment following the headings: not supported; TF agreed to bullet point h: the summary of the safety assessment should be consistent with the framework of Codex Plant GL (paras 98–100, 7th TF); 4. The EC proposed the inclusion of "validated protocol and reference material": not agreed, but para. 28 i) detection method/reference material, and j) contact details were agreed. Concern about IPR was expressed with regard to the inclusion of a viable reference (paras 101–102).

With regard to paragraph 6, Prof Yoshikura stated that national authorities should determine two points: 1. Whether LLP is sufficiently low for application of the Annex; 2. Whether to use full risk assessment or assessment using the Annex. Furthermore, he underlined that Annex III does not eliminate the responsibility of industries, exporters and, where appropriate, national competent authorities to continue to meet the relevant import requirements set by countries, including in relation to unauthorized r-DNA material (LLP).

In conclusion, Prof Yoshikura stressed that the Platform will only be useful when the data and information are shared by Members. He highlighted that the FAO's objective, to establish a simple user-friendly platform, has been reached. From now on, Codex Members are responsible for uploading data and are encouraged to participate actively in FAO's information-sharing activity by uploading their relevant data and information. Prof Yoshikura's presentation is available at: http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/agns/pdf/topics/Side_Event_Platform_Background_Dr_Yoshikura.pdf.

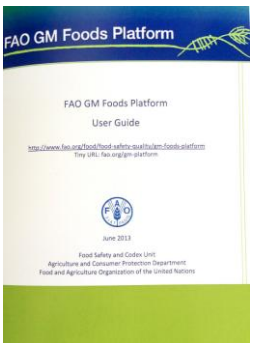
5. Launch of the Platform
Dr Masami T. Takeuchi (Food Safety Officer, FAO)

Dr Takeuchi informed the floor about the process of development of the Platform. In late 2012, FAO established an Informal Network of national experts from a total of 33 countries. The purpose of the Informal Network was to discuss the scope, structure and functions of the Platform. The contribution of the Informal Network members was completely voluntary and was not to represent individual

countries' positions. Some very fruitful discussions took place through e-mail exchanges. The FAO GM Foods Platform has undergone two full review cycles before being launched, to ensure that it meets the requirements agreed in the Codex guideline as well as the diverse needs of all Codex Members. Dr Takeuchi acknowledged the valuable contributions of the Informal Network members and explained that the FAO GM Foods Platform would not exist without their kind help.

Dr Takeuchi then explained that the FAO GM Foods Platform is open to the public and the data/information shared on the platform is visible to all. Only Focal Points officially nominated by national authorities are allowed to upload data/information on the Platform. With regard to the nomination and registration process: 1. In April 2013 a Nomination form was distributed by e-mail to the Codex mailing list; 2. Codex Contact Points were requested to facilitate the national nomination process; 3. The Nomination Form should be completed and returned to GM-Platform@fao.org; 4. The FAO GM Foods Platform team sends detailed instructions to the nominated Focal Points (copied to Alternates, if any) to register online.

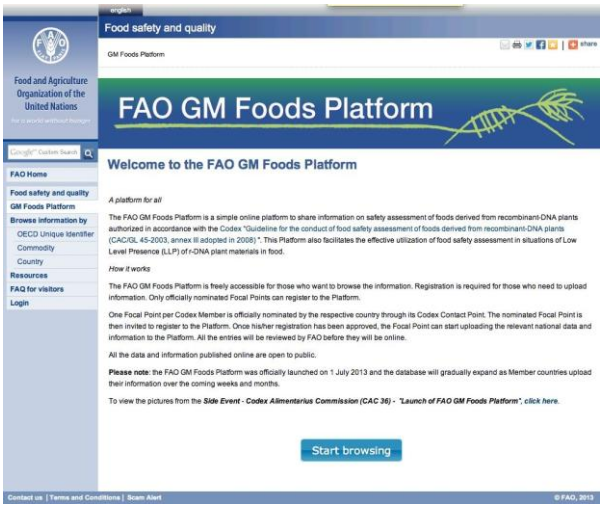
Dr Takeuchi then highlighted the desired profile of the Focal Points for information, followed by a progress report. As of 30 June 2013: 1. 71 members (countries) have officially nominated Focal Points to the Platform; 2. Many of them have also nominated Alternates to the Focal Points; 3. 56 countries (Focal Points) have registered to the Platform; 4. Four countries have filled out the "Country Profile" section; 5. Three countries have started to upload the relevant data and information.



Dr Takeuchi encouraged the audience to communicate with their national Focal Points on actively engaging with the Platform. She explained that the Platform's user guide is very detailed, although the Platform itself is quite intuitive, because FAO intends to provide maximum assistance to all levels of user. The user guide comprises 35 pages, includes step-by-step instructions, and should be useful to those who are not very familiar with online form submission systems. The user guide is available at: http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/gmfp/resources/2_FAO_GM_Foods_Platform_User_Guide.pdf

Dr Takeuchi then emphasized the importance of critical review of the Platform by the Codex Members, because each Codex Member is responsible for the accuracy of the information uploaded. She explained that FAO holds a responsibility to maintain only the format of the information shared. All the texts and functions of the Platform have been discussed among the Informal Network members and decided largely on the basis of practicality, because the Informal Network was not designed to develop an official consensus. If any Members have suggestions for changes, FAO invites them to discuss the item(s) officially with all Codex Members to obtain consensus (e.g. through an electronic Working Group). Once FAO receives such official consensus to change items on the FAO

GM Foods Platform, FAO will immediately implement the changes accordingly. This applies to all the texts, functions, labels, links and documents that appear on the Platform.



Following this, Dr Takeuchi explained the planned evaluation process to be conducted by FAO before the next Commission in 2014. If a significant number of countries have uploaded relevant data and information, FAO's commitment to maintain the Platform will be assured and FAO will make maximum effort to secure funds for this activity. However, in a situation of low usage levels, FAO may suggest that Codex Members discuss the Platform's future at the occasion of the Commission in 2014.

Finally, Dr Takeuchi showed the newly developed Platform, demonstrating how to navigate and use the FAO GM Foods Platform, including: Homepage (http://fao.org/gm-platform); Browse information by Commodity; Browse information by OECD Unique Identifier; Browse information by Country; Resources, FAQ for visitors; Log-in as a Focal Point; My work area; Adding a new record; and the Process to allow one entry to be published.

The presentation for this launch is available at: http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/agns/pdf/topics/Side_Event_Platform_Launch.pdf.

6. Panel discussions

The speeches were followed by panel discussions of about 30 minutes. The panel discussions consisted of comments from panel members and an interactive Q & A session with the participants. Dr Paul Mayers (Canada) raised the importance of the Platform in the event of LLP. The Platform gives the opportunity to gain an insight into the decisions of countries that have already conducted an assessment. The Platform is consistent with Annex III of the Codex Plant Guideline and looks at the issue of LLP from the perspective of the regulatory authorities. He explained that the available detection capacity can result in different levels of LLP detection. The Platform is able to facilitate decision-making within countries by providing inputs from science-based food safety assessment of foods derived from r-DNA plant materials. Countries should ensure that the information is submitted in order to reduce the negative impact of LLP events.

Dr Paul Brent (Australia) echoed the importance of the Platform and said that governments should supply information for the purpose of sharing the scientific data on safety assessment. In Australia, data are submitted to a national website and are publicly accessible. Dr Brent also briefly discussed the new plant breeding techniques. Countries need to be aware of such new developments and to consider the fundamental scope and purpose of safety assessment as well as the eventual regulatory framework.

Prof Yoshikura pointed out that the FAO GM foods Platform is not useful if there are absolutely no LLP events in the world. He suggested that the floor ponder this question. If LLP events continue to occur, he considered that the Platform will become more useful. He also stated that the Codex Guideline represents a compromise; however, because it has been adopted the final product is a form of the agreement reached by all Codex Members.

Dr Marilia Nutti said that he found the Platform user-friendly and believes that countries need to recognize the importance of this information-sharing function and start using the Platform actively.

Dr Mike Wehr noted the history of the development of the database within the work of the Codex Ad Hoc Intergovernmental Task Force, and that it was important to understand that the database was limited to elements listed in paragraph 28 of the LLP Annex to the Codex Plant Guideline. Dr Wehr also suggested that consideration be given to making the title of the Platform more precise because the Platform relates only to foods derived from r-DNA plants, and does not deal with the broader subject of genetically modified foods.

Dr Martin Lema sent a message via video-streaming that he would like to praise Dr Yoshikura's leadership during the TFFBT, which allowed the attainment of a balanced and delicate consensus on the LLP Annex in general, and the FAO Platform in particular. He also stated that LLP is an increasingly important issue, so there is little time left for governments to start implementing the guideline and its annexes, hence the FAO Platform is greatly needed.

There were several key questions from the floor:
1. How can Codex members suggest/propose changes to the Platform? There should be a mechanism within the Codex system to discuss suggestions. If a country needs to raise any item for the attention of the Codex Alimentarius Commission, there is a formal procedure. FAO will immediately make amendments if it receives a consensus from Codex Members regarding any changes to the Platform. An observer-status NGO has also asked whether it is possible to amend the disclaimer to include a sentence stating that the data/information shared on the Platform should not be used for commercial purposes. The same formal procedure can be used to propose the change.

2. Can the FAO GM Foods Platform negatively affect trade? The answer is no, and the Platform itself should actually be useful in facilitating trade. The platform is only to be used for information-sharing purposes, and national authorities should benefit from access to the information submitted by various Codex Members. An LLP event itself is of course a concern regarding trade disruption.

3. Does the FAO GM Foods Platform deal with the labelling issue? The FAO GM Foods Platform only hosts information on safety assessment of foods derived from r-DNA plants and it strictly follows Annex III – Section 3 of the Codex Plant Guideline, therefore it does not deal with the labelling issue.

4. Can other useful scientific information and articles be hosted by the FAO GM Foods Platform? The Platform is designed to address the needs expressed by Codex Members during the adoption of Annex III of the Codex Plant Guideline, therefore the information shared on the Platform will be in line with the agreement reached at the Commission. Thus, FAO does not intend to host other information, in order to avoid information overload.

7. Closing remarks

Dr Masami T. Takeuchi (Food Safety Officer, FAO)

Dr Takeuchi stated that all materials presented during the side event will be available online at ttp://fao.org/gm-platform/ under "Resources", along with a summary report, within a few weeks. She thanked everyone for their interest and participation, including her colleagues. Special thanks went to Prof. Yoshikura, and to all the panel members: Dr Paul Brent, Dr Paul Mayers, Dr Martin Lema, Dr Mike Wehr and Dr Marilia Nutti.

Photos of the side event to the 36th Codex Alimentarius Commission will be available at: http://www.flickr.com//photos/faonews/sets/72157634423098697/show/

8. Acronyms

BCH	Biosafety Clearing House
CP	Contact Point
DNA	Deoxyribonucleic acid
EC	European Commission
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
GL	Guideline
GM	Genetically modified
IPR	Intellectual property rights
LLP	Low level presence
NGO	Non-governmental organization
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
r-DNA	Recombinant-DNA
Q & A	Question and answer
TF	Task force
TFFBT	Codex Ad Hoc Task Force on Food derived from Biotechnology

FAO GM Foods Platform

Final Meeting Agenda

Launch of the FAO GM Foods Platform
http://fao.org/gm-platform/

Monday, 1 July 2013 13.00–15.00
Philippines Room, FAO HQ, Rome, Italy
Side event to the 36th Codex Alimentarius Commission

Time	Agenda Item	Presenter
13.00 – 13.15	Welcome remark	Mr Steve Crossly, Senior Officer, JECFA Secretariat (FAO)
13.15 – 13.30	Lunch	All
13.30 – 13.40	Introduction to FAO and FAO's work in the area of food safety	Dr Masami Takeuchi, Food Safety Officer (FAO)
13.40 – 13.55	Background for FAO to develop and maintain an information sharing Platform for safety assessment of foods derived from recombinant-DNA plant materials - Codex Alimentarius Ad Hoc Task Force on Foods derived from Biotechnology (TFFBT) - Codex Plant guideline and its annexes - Codex members' agreement to share information on the FAO Platform - Q and A	Prof. Hiroshio Yoshikura, Former Chair of the TFFBT, Advisor, Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (Japan)
13.55 – 14.20	Launch of the Platform - Progress made - Focal point nomination process - Demonstration - Q and A	Dr Masami Takeuchi (FAO)
14.20 – 14.50	Panel discussions - Scope and importance of the platform - Opportunity and challenges - Q and A	Dr Paul Brent (Australia) Dr Paul Mayers (Canada) Dr Martin Lema (Argentina) via Video Dr Mike Wehr (USA) Dr Marilia Nutti (Brazil) Prof. Hiroshi Yoshikura (Japan)
14.50 – 15.00	Closing remark	Dr Masami Takeuchi (FAO)

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