FOOD REGULATION AND THE POULTRY INDUSTRY

A. S. HILL

Summary

While Australia has one of the highest levels of food safety in the world, we still experience more than five million cases of food poisoning each year, mostly of short-term duration and unreported. This high burden of food-borne illness is unacceptable in economic and human terms.

In response to the growing burden of food borne illness, Australia, along with many other countries, as well as the Codex Alimentarius, have identified a new approach that will more effectively manage food safety. The new approach identifies food safety areas and activities that contribute significantly to the burden of food borne disease on basis of a scientific risk assessment, and focus on preventive management strategies across the entire food chain that identify and minimise food borne hazards at the point in the food chain where the hazards are introduced.

Food Standards Australia New Zealand – also known as FSANZ – is an independent government agency responsible for developing standards for the handling, composition and labelling of food in Australia and New Zealand. FSANZ also develops food safety or food hygiene standards for Australia. New Zealand has its own processes for this purpose. FSANZ is a partnership between ten governments: the Commonwealth; Australian States and Territories; and New Zealand.

In developing or varying a food standard, FSANZ is required by its legislation to meet three primary objectives:

- the protection of public health and safety;
- the provision of adequate information relating to food to enable consumers to make informed choices; and
- the prevention of misleading or deceptive conduct.

FSANZ also has regard to:

- the need for standards to be based on risk analysis using the best available scientific evidence;
- the promotion of consistency between domestic and international food standards;
- the desirability of an efficient and internationally competitive food industry; and
- the promotion of fair trading in food.

The governments of Australia decided, in 2000, to establish a new regulatory framework for food. This framework came into effect in July 2002 and has resulted in a new approach to safety in the food supply. There are four major elements of the new approach:

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1 Food Standards Australia New Zealand, PO Box 7186, Canberra BC, ACT, Australia.
consideration of the food chain in its entirety for food safety purposes;
- a science-based assessment of risk at critical points in the food chain and the development of appropriate strategies to manage the risk and to communicate with stakeholders in the process (including industry and consumers);
- an emphasis on preventative rather than reactive measures; and
- a new shared responsibility for food safety between the primary production and health portfolios of government.

On 1 July 2002, FSANZ assumed responsibility for the development of Primary Production and Processing Standards for Australia and will commence work on the development of a standard for poultry meat in February 2004. These standards will be outcome-based and focus on food safety. The standards aim to:

- increase public confidence in the safety of food products;
- provide nationally consistent standards that will set a benchmark for industry obligations to produce safe food;
- harmonise with international standards;
- ensure that food safety is addressed across the entire food chain; and
- provide minimum impost on industry to achieve the most effective food safety outcomes

A Standards Development Committee (SDC), with representation from industry, consumer, government and research organisations will provide advice and input to FSANZ in the development of each standard. The standard-setting process will involve public consultation with all primary industry sectors, stakeholders, consumers and other interested parties.

The Primary Production and Processing Standards will, for the first time, provide nationally consistent food safety regulations that are mandatory and enforceable across Australia. They will also apply to imported foods and the Australian Quarantine Inspection Service (AQIS) will ensure that importers comply with the new regulations.