

Senate Community Affairs Committee

ANSWERS TO ESTIMATES QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

HEALTH PORTFOLIO

Budget Estimates 2015 – 2016, 1 - 2 June 2015

Ref No: SQ15-000400

OUTCOME: 1 – Population Health

Topic: Tracking of International Food Safety Issues

Type of Question: Written Question on Notice

Senator: Xenophon, Nick

Question:

In response to questions I placed on notice during additional estimates, the Biosecurity Compliance division stated that it was FSANZ's responsibility to track international food safety issues and advise the department accordingly, and that no advice had been given relating to the frozen berries and Hepatitis A outbreaks overseas in 2012 and 2013.

- a) Is this correct?
- b) Why did FSANZ not believe the berries to be in Australia? How was this determined? Did country of origin labelling or tracking play a part?
- c) Further, the department stated that 'available information suggested at that time that the implicated berries were not imported into Australia'. When did FSANZ become aware that these berries had in fact been imported to Australia?
- d) Do such cases overseas trigger any increased scrutiny or testing in Australia? If not, why not?
- e) What monitoring of overseas events does FSANZ usually undertake?
- f) What risk has to be present before FSANZ recommends recalling a product because of issues overseas, even if they haven't yet been present in Australia?
- g) What implications do the findings and recommendations from the Auditor-General's report into the Administration of the Imported Food Inspection Scheme have for this case?

Answer:

- a) Both Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) and the Department of Agriculture are focal points for the receipt of advice about international food incidents. The responsibilities of FSANZ in relation to imported food are set out in an Annex to the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the Department of Agriculture and Department of Health
<http://www.agriculture.gov.au/biosecurity/partnerships/mou/annex-fsanx-imported-food>, made under clause 9 of that Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). Under the MoU, FSANZ does not have a specific responsibility to track international food safety issues, or to provide advice about all such issues. FSANZ may provide advice in some circumstances, and will do so in response to a request from the Department of Agriculture.
- b) At the time of the referenced hepatitis A and contaminated berries outbreak in Europe (occurring in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden, 2012–2013), FSANZ obtained information via the World Health Organization's International Food Safety Authorities Network (INFOSAN) that:
- the National Food Agency in Sweden had analysed 11 samples of berries from three different outbreaks but were not been able to find any hepatitis A virus;
 - the Danish Veterinary and Food Administration advised that through investigation and several patient interviews, it had identified the potential source of infection, but this did not lead to the discovery of the virus in examined strawberries; and
 - frozen strawberries from Egypt and Morocco were considered to be the most likely source of the outbreak.

Investigation of import data at the time found that Australia had (in the past) imported frozen strawberries from Morocco and Egypt, but only in small quantities and not at a relevant time. The Department of Agriculture and Customs advised that there was no record in its databases of an import of frozen strawberries from these countries during the previous 12 months. Additionally, there was no notification of Australia receiving contaminated product via the (Europe-based) Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed network (RASFF).

Similarly, in relation to a separate multi-country outbreak of hepatitis A that occurred in Europe in 2013 (Italy, France, Norway, Ireland, the Netherlands and Sweden), FSANZ did not receive any evidence that implicated berries had been exported to Australia.

In relation to a recent (2013), unrelated, hepatitis A outbreak in the United States of America, FSANZ also received information through international networks. As a result of direct follow-up with US authorities and industry, FSANZ was able to confirm that implicated product (frozen pomegranate arils/kernels) was not present in Australia.

- c) FSANZ had received no evidence to suggest that any frozen berries or fruit associated with the hepatitis A outbreaks mentioned above had been imported into Australia.
- d) FSANZ does not determine the rate of screening or testing of imported foods. These are matters governed by the *Imported Food Control Act 1994*, which is administered by the Department of Agriculture.

- e) FSANZ routinely receives alerts of international food safety issues through networks such as INFOSAN (international); the APEC Food Safety Cooperation Forum (APEC FSCF) covering the Asia-Pacific region; the RASFF, operating in Europe; and through bilateral arrangements with some food regulators.

FSANZ also reviews information on international food safety issues through a variety of mechanisms e.g. the monitoring of emerging issues, through sources such as published scientific/medical literature and media reports.

- f) FSANZ has no role in recommending a recall of a food. Food recall powers are exercised by state and territory authorities under state and territory laws. In the course of normal business, FSANZ notifies Commonwealth, state and territory regulators of most information that it has received about foreign food-related outbreaks, if there is any likelihood of the product entering Australia in normal trade. When state and territory regulators are aware that a relevant product is available in the Australian market, based on the level of evidence of a food safety risk, they may decide to exercise statutory recall powers or encourage the importer to conduct a voluntary recall of the product.
- g) The Department of Agriculture is responsible for the administration of the Imported Food Inspection Scheme and has advised that none of the findings or recommendations directly address the issue of microbiological contamination of ready-to-eat berries.

The Australian National Audit Office tabled its report in the Parliament on the audit of the Imported Food Inspection Scheme (IFIS) on 10 June 2015. The report concluded that the IFIS was generally effective and included three recommendations relating to:

1. the monitoring of imported food referrals to the Department of Agriculture from the Integrated Cargo System;
2. the improved management of inspection workflow and the reporting and management of incidents of non-compliance; and
3. the development of performance measures for the IFIS.

The Department of Agriculture has agreed to all three recommendations and is implementing measures to them. Taken together, these measures will further strengthen the operation of the IFIS.