Senate Community Affairs Committee

ANSWERS TO ESTIMATES QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

HEALTH PORTFOLIO

Supplementary Budget Estimates 2016 – 2017, 19 October 2016

Ref No: SQ16-000560

OUTCOME: 2 – Health Access and Support Services

Topic: GM Processing Aids

Type of Question: Written Question on Notice

Senator: Rice, Janet

Question:

In its 2007 Final Assessment Report from its review of processing aids (enzymes) FSANZ concludes that "in the case of enzymes produced from genetically modified micro-organisms the enzyme is not a novel protein since it is identical to other enzymes sourced from non-genetically derived sources."

a) Does FSANZ stand by this statement?
b) Is FSANZ aware of the recent study published in Occupational & Environmental Medicine which found that genetically modified enzymes used in food, perfumes, medicine and cleaning products are "potent allergens"?
c) Does FSANZ consider potential allergenicity in its safety assessment of GM enzymes?
d) How does FSANZ assess the safety of ingredients such as vanillin derived from GM micro-organisms?
e) How does FSANZ verify the claims of manufacturers that these ingredients are chemically identical to natural ingredients?

Answer:

a) The statement relates to the labelling of enzyme processing aids from genetically modified sources under then Standard 1.5.2 – Food produced using Gene Technology.

   It is correct that the majority of enzyme processing aids derived from genetically modified (GM) sources are not required to be labelled as GM because they do not meet the definition for "novel protein" under Standard 1.5.2. Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) has also assessed four applications for which it has been concluded that the enzymes are novel protein, and that GM labelling is required if they remain in the final food.

b) Yes. It is well known that occupational exposure to enzymes can cause allergic reactions. Allergic reactions can occur with enzymes from GM and non-GM sources. They are not related to the production method.

c) Yes. Potential allergenicity is considered for all enzyme processing aids, irrespective of whether or not they are derived from a GM microorganism.

d) Vanillin is a flavouring substance. The assessment of flavourings is oversighted at an international level by the Joint FAO/WHO Expert Committee on Food Additives (JECFA), which also establishes specifications for identity and purity. FSANZ contributes to this process and participates on this Committee.

Flavourings are assessed according to their chemical structure and their estimated intake levels. This enables a determination of whether they are likely to be metabolised to innocuous products and that their intake levels will be below a level that may raise a safety concern.

Whether a flavouring is obtained from a non-GM or a GM organism is irrelevant to safety, provided it complies with the relevant specification for identity and purity.

Under the *Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code* (Code), flavouring substances like vanillin are generally permitted to be added to food provided they are used in accordance with good manufacturing practice, and comply with relevant specifications for identity and purity, as set out in Schedule 3 in the Code. This Schedule references the JECFA specifications.

e) FSANZ does not verify claims that 'these ingredients are chemically identical to natural ingredients'. This is the responsibility of manufacturers.