

Resolution on Food Safety Rapid Alert Notification Systems

Introduction:

Foodborne illness contributes to morbidity and mortality burdens worldwide. The growth of international trade, migration, and travel has led to the increased spread of pathogens and contaminated food. To control disease and protect public health, a strong system to quickly and efficiently alert authorities and consumers nationally and internationally must be put in place and supported through transatlantic coordination and communication.

The Transatlantic Consumer Dialogue (TACD) is a forum for the United States (U.S.) and European Union (E.U.) consumer organizations to develop joint consumer policy recommendations to the U.S. and E.U. governments that promote consumer interests. A food safety policy that protects consumers is the use of a rapid alert system – a system that provides a platform for and facilitates the exchange of emergency food safety information between regions, states, and countries. An effective and collaborative rapid alert system that disseminates information about serious risks detected in the food supply AND effectively communicates those risks to the public will provide the greatest public health protection.

Background:

The World Health Organization and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations developed the International Food Safety Authorities Network (INFOSAN) to provide a mechanism for sharing food safety information between authorities across the globe. The mandate for INFOSAN came from World Health Assembly's (WHA) resolution on food safety that requested the Director General to put in place a global strategy for the surveillance of foodborne diseases and for the efficient gathering and exchange of information in and between countries and regions.

INFOSAN was designed to aid in the communication between countries/regions during food safety related events (microbiological, chemical, and physical hazards in foods) as well as promote collaboration and help countries strengthen capacity to manage food safety events. INFOSAN has 177 United Nation Member States enrolled in the network with emergency contact points identified in 173 Member States. Based on the INFOSAN 2010 progress report, the network is facing many challenges, including: keeping contact information up to date for Emergency Contact Points, enhancing response times during food safety emergencies, and providing sufficient human resources to manage the program. Nonetheless, there are key components of the program that should be

incorporated into future rapid alert system designs. Two of these components are:

- Emergency Contact Points (contact persons who report and receive urgent food safety events of significance in their region/country).
- Identification, verification, and dissemination of INFOSAN Emergency Alert messages and information on food safety events.

The Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed (RASFF) is utilized in the E.U. This tool facilitates the timely exchange of information between Member States and the Commission when risks to public health are detected in the food supply and/or feed supply. All members of the RASFF (27 from the E.U., the European Commission, EFSA, ESA, Norway, Liechtenstein, Iceland and Switzerland) have a system to ensure that urgent notifications are sent, received, and responded to as quickly as possible. An alert notification is sent to members when a food, feed or food contact material presenting a serious risk is on the market, and when rapid action (recall/withdrawal from market) might be or is required in another country. Members have their own mechanisms to perform food safety actions, including delivering information through the media to consumers. Additionally, the RASFF-Database has been analyzed and found to be useful in identifying known hazards that are re-emerging.

The U.S. has not adopted an intergovernmental rapid alert system, though food recalls are posted online through the Food Safety and Inspection Service's (FSIS) and Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) websites. There are concerns in the public health community that these recall notices are going unnoticed by consumers and that more communication and information sharing should be done between the food safety agencies.

Risk communication:

Effective risk communication to consumers during a food safety emergency will provide the necessary and appropriate information as simply and clearly as possible. It also helps the public respond to the food safety hazard appropriately, reduces the likelihood of misinformation, and demonstrates solid leadership. It is important that countries develop and agree upon emergency communication plans and ways to deliver public health messages by working with the local/national media. Sharing risk communication successes and failures based on previous food safety events can help to plan future strategies to alert and educate the public on how they can best protect themselves and their families. Risk communication plans need to be part of a rapid alert system.

Consumer concerns:

There is concern worldwide about the potential spread of foodborne hazards. For example, in 2011, a foodborne outbreak occurred in Germany that was caused by a rare strain of multi-drug resistant *E. coli* O104:H4. The outbreak resulted in over 4,000 illnesses worldwide, including more than 900 hemolytic uremic syndrome (HUS) cases and 50 deaths. TACD recognizes the difficulty in verifying quickly and accurately the sources of all foodborne illnesses, but TACD also believes that having the opportunity to recall foods prior to illnesses or immediately after outbreaks are detected is the best public health strategy. Given the global food supply, insufficient or uncoordinated communication within and between countries that trade food and have common trade partners will lead to future outbreaks and illnesses. To reduce the burden of foodborne

illness, international collaboration and information sharing is essential, along with the dissemination of targeted public health messages to consumers.

In conclusion, TACD urges governments in both regions to consider developing a global surveillance system and a transatlantic rapid alert system that will allow for food safety information exchange between regions, states, and countries in order to better protect consumers in the U.S. and E.U. from food safety hazards.

Recommendations:

1. TACD calls for the E.U. and the U.S. to develop a strategy for sharing emergency food safety information quickly.
2. TACD calls for the E.U. and the U.S. to collect and share data in real-time/as rapidly as possible that will aid in monitoring food safety problems in their own regions and help other countries identify potential hazards before they enter other regions.
3. TACD urges governments to create and fund a global surveillance system and a transatlantic rapid alert system that integrates U.S. and E.U. food safety outbreak and recall data, and appoints Emergency Contact Points in each state and/or region.
4. TACD requests that the national health authorities implement a strategy to rapidly alert U.S. and E.U. members and consumers of food safety hazards utilizing specialized Emergency Alert messages as part of a risk communication plan.

Resolution:

The emergence and spread of foodborne hazards is a worldwide public health threat. TACD calls on the U.S. and the E.U. to develop a strategy for sharing emergency food safety hazard information effectively and quickly. The strategy should model key aspects of INFOSAN and RASFF systems. Specifically, TACD requests that the United States and European Union develop a global surveillance system and a transatlantic rapid alert system that improve transatlantic communication and the delivery of timely food safety messages to consumers.