General introduction to the Policy background of Food safety, quality, traceability and marketing

A brief history of regulation and food safety

European food safety legislation has developed significantly over the past 15 years.

Initially, regulation was comprised mainly of directives relating to specific issues: such as the Directive on the Official Control of Foodstuffs (89/397/EC) (June 1989), the Directive on the Hygiene of Foodstuffs (93/43/EC) (June 1993), Directives on sweeteners (94/35/EC) and on colours (94/36/EC) (June 1994) and a Directive on additives other than colours and sweeteners (95/2/EC) (February 1995).

By April 1997 policy emphasis had changed and the Commission issued the first Green Paper, or discussion document, on European Food Law and in September 1997 the Commission established a Food and Veterinary Office. January 2000 saw the publication of a Commission White Paper on Food Safety (COM(1999)719) followed in November 2000 by proposals for Regulation on food law and the establishment of the European Food Authority (COM(2000)716) In January 2002 EU Regulation 178/2002 on food law was adopted and the European Food Safety Authority established.

The Dioxin/PCB Situation

Of particular importance to aquaculture is the issue of contamination by dioxins and PCBs.

Health authorities world-wide are committed to reducing human exposure to dioxins and dioxin-like PCBs as it is now understood that dioxins and PCBs are toxic chemicals that can provoke serious health effects such as cancer, hormone disruption, fertility problems and skin toxicity and immune system disorders. In general, food of animal origin contributes to about 80% of the overall human exposure.

In May 1999, the incidence of contaminated animal feed raised Europe-wide awareness of the dangers of contamination of animal products with dioxins and PCBs.

This led the EC Standing Committee on Animal Feedstuffs (SCAN) to propose adding to the Regulations on prohibited feed ingredients, adding to the undesirable substances legislation and imposing maximum limits for dioxin content. The pressure to act in the wake of the dioxin crisis prompted proposals to set dioxin limits for feed and food, including fishmeal, fish oil and compound feed.

Risk assessments on dioxins in food (Scientific Committee for Food - SCF 30 May 2001) and dioxins in feed (Scientific Committee for Animal Nutrition - SCAN 6 November 2000) were the basis for these proposals.

The SCAN opinion deals with dioxin and PCB contamination of animal feed, the likely exposure of food producing animals (mammals, birds and fish) and the carry-over of this contamination to food products.

There are three pillars to the dioxin legislation

1. The establishment of maximum levels (MLs), taking into account the current background contamination, at a strict but feasible level.

2. The establishment of action levels acting as a tool for 'early warning' which triggers a proactive approach from competent authorities and operators.

3. The establishment of target levels to be achieved in order to bring the exposure of the large majority of the European population below the TWI set by SCF

Legally binding maximum limits on the presence of dioxins in food and in animal feed are now in place (EU Commission Recommendation 2006/88/EC sets new combined action limits for dioxin and dioxin-like PCB levels in farmed animal and fish feed (14 November 2006).

Regulatory Authorities

Regulation is both complex and increasing. It is important to ascertain if such regulation is proportionate and necessary and to maintain independent research and scientific activity regarding food safety.

The lead regulatory authority is the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA). EFSA provides independent scientific advice on all matters linked to food and feed safety. It includes animal health and welfare and provides scientific advice in relation to Community legislation.

The EFSA Scientific Panel on Animal Health and Welfare (AHAW) deals with questions on all aspects of animal health and animal welfare, primarily relating to food producing animals including fish.

EFSA is the keystone of European Union (EU) risk assessment regarding food and feed safety. In close collaboration with national authorities and in open consultation with its stakeholders, EFSA provides independent scientific advice and clear communication on existing and emerging risks. Regulation extends to additives, labelling, feedstuffs etc.

In addition to regulation within individual EU member states there are also regulatory organisations at an international level.

The lead international organisation is the Codex Alimentarius Commission, created in 1963 by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Health Organisation (WHO) to develop food standards, guidelines and related texts such as codes of practice under the Joint FAO/WHO Food Standards Programme.

The main purposes of this Programme are to protect the health of the consumers and to ensure fair trade practices in the food trade, and promoting coordination of all food standards work undertaken by international governmental and non-governmental organisations.

The importance of food safety

Food safety underpins consumer confidence in food production; this makes it vital to ensuring the continuing growth and development of the aquaculture market and it is important to maintain up to date scientific information on issues relating to food safety.

What is food quality?

Quality may be seen to encompass food safety, standards of production, traceability of product from farm to fork, farming practices and many other aspects of food production. Expectations of food quality and food standards continue to be raised in response to growing market demands, consumer preferences and expectations and the demands of the multiple retailers and distributors.

The requirement for traceability

Traceability refers to the ability to trace and follow a food, feedstuff, a food-producing animal, or any substance intended to be, or expected to be, incorporated into a food or feedstuff.

Since January 2005 the requirement throughout the European Union is for business operators to be able to identify any person from whom they have been supplied with a product, as well as the businesses to which their products have been supplied. Operators must demonstrate systems and procedures which allow for this information to be made available to the relevant competent authorities if required.

Marketing and Food Trade

Market forces and the aquaculture value chain have been influenced by changes in the distribution of products, increasingly through multiple retailers, increased processing leading to greater added product value and in increase in market consumption of farmed over caught fish.

One factor influencing the aquaculture value chain is consumer preference. This may be linked to issues concerning product quality, presentation, changing fashion and developments in health and nutrition. Food safety and nutrition is closely involved with marketing and the development of sustainable aquaculture across Europe.

Summaries

The summaries (technical leaflets) relating to food safety, quality, traceability and marketing include:

- DAPAFF
- EUROSALMON
- SALMAR
- TRACEFISH