

Editorial

Australia New Zealand Food Authority in the Asia Pacific region

Ian Lindenmayer BA, BEcon

Managing Director, Australia New Zealand Food Authority, Canberra, ACT, Australia

Australia and New Zealand have been active and enthusiastic supporters of both the concept and the specific agreed objectives of APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation). APEC has set out 'to reinforce economic cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region on the basis of equal partnership, shared responsibility, mutual respect, common interest, and common benefit, with the objective of leading the way in:

- strengthening the open multilateral trading system;
- enhancing trade and investment liberalization in the Asia-Pacific area; and
- intensifying Asia-Pacific development cooperation'.*

Over the past three decades, Australia and New Zealand have both been tireless contributors to the work of the Codex Alimentarius Commission in developing international food standards. Under the World Trade Organization (WTO) Agreements, the role of these standards has been strengthened and formalised as the benchmarks for international trade in food.

The Australian and New Zealand commitment to these international activities and objectives means that the Australia New Zealand Food Authority (ANZFA) has strong bi-national support for its international work. ANZFA is actively defining its role and the contribution it can make to achieving APEC's long-term goal of free and open trade and investment no later than the year 2010 in the case of industrialised economies, and 2020 in the case of developing economies.

Australia and New Zealand are large exporters of food and agricultural products. They are multicultural nations, Australia being one of the most multicultural nations on earth with a population derived from more than 180 countries. Both countries enjoy a safe and wholesome food supply of great diversity with a wide range of culinary styles.

ANZFA is an unusual entity as it is bi-national. It came into existence in July 1996 through an agreement between the Government of Australia and the Government of New Zealand which established a system for the development of joint food standards. As a result of this agreement, ANZFA provides a range of services to both Australia and New Zealand, while other aspects of its work service Australian needs only. One of its major bilateral undertakings is to develop one set of food regulations for food products across the two countries. This trans-Tasman uniformity is being achieved through the comprehensive review of the standards of the Australian Food Standards Code. Another objective of this review is to align as far as possible with the international food standards of the Codex Alimentarius, within the terms of the commitments made by Australia and New Zealand to the WTO.

In Australia, the individual states and territories are responsible for food law, with ANZFA playing a key role in establishing national uniformity of the requirements for food products. The 'standards' developed by ANZFA are adopted by the states and territories, simultaneously and without amendment, as mandatory regulations. In New Zealand there is a similar but not identical system for the adoption of the joint standards.

Other work performed by ANZFA solely for Australia includes leading the review of the State and Territory Food Acts and the reform of food hygiene regulations with a view to national uniformity across all aspects of food law. In line with global trends and the drive to achieve minimum effective regulation, ANZFA provided the base for the secretariat for a review of the regulatory burden on the food industry across Australia, examining the full range of agencies and controls that apply to the food sector. All of this work is undertaken in close collaboration with government agencies relevant to food and agriculture at national, state, territory and local levels.

ANZFA has a wide range of other Australian functions for which there is a possibility of closer collaboration between Australia and New Zealand, including the national coordination of food recalls, the conduct of national surveys of agricultural and veterinary chemical residues and contaminants in foods, the development and maintenance of food composition data and the coordination of the states and territories to ensure uniform application and interpretation of food standards.

ANZFA is also seeking to establish partnerships with counterpart agencies in the region to enhance cooperation and learning, as regulators and industry alike strive to meet the many challenges in achieving this aim. One of the major challenges is to build the legislative, administrative and technical infrastructures of countries at all stages of industrialization in order to meet the demands and disciplines imposed by compliance with the WTO.

ANZFA has a modest program of development assistance in the region and is actively working at increasing its knowledge and awareness of those aspects of food control where it can be most effective in providing assistance. Australia New

Correspondence address: Ian Lindenmayer, PO Box 7186, Canberra Mail Centre, ACT 2610, Australia.
Tel: 61 2 6271 2222; Fax: 61 2 6271 2278
Email: info@anzfa.gov.au

*Extract from APEC Economic Leaders' Declaration of Common Resolve, Bogor, Indonesia, November 15, 1994.

Zealand Food Authority work in this area has been supported by Australian and New Zealand aid funding. Consideration is also being given to providing ANZFA with further support for this work through APEC Trade and Investment Liberalization and Facilitation funds. Such APEC funds would be utilised to support training in the application of risk analysis and the conduct of forums for exchanging views on regulation at the interface between food and therapeutic products. ANZFA is enthusiastic about expanding its role in the provision of such assistance.

To prevent unnecessary barriers to trade, the WTO Agreements require sound scientific justification for varying from international standards. One of the areas of ANZFA's particular expertise is in developing standard risk assessment procedures to assess whether a departure from international standards is justified on public health grounds.

As part of the review of standards, there has been a detailed examination of the levels set for contaminants, food additives and nutrient additions in food. The establishment of sound scientific procedures and reference data bases is central to decision making in the risk assessment and management processes that determine the levels set in regulations.

These processes include dietary modelling, the technique of integrating food consumption data with food chemical data to estimate dietary exposure to food chemicals. Dietary modelling is an important tool. Its use in the risk assessment process ensures that food consumption patterns are taken into account when setting appropriate levels for chemicals in food. Dietary exposure assessments are used to assess the risk to health associated with proposed changes to the food supply and are useful in identifying risk minimisation options to develop risk management strategies.

ANZFA's primary objective is the protection of public health and safety and this is its overriding concern. However, this is not its only objective. ANZFA, in fact, is also striving to achieve standards and regulatory systems that protect against deception of the consumer and facilitate domestic and international trade in food.

These goals need not be in competition with each other, such that more of one means less of the others. On the contrary, with sound science, extensive consultation with stakeholders and good policy, approaches can be formulated which deliver an optimal combination of these — and this is ANZFA's mission.