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FOOD SAFETY IN FOOD SECURITY AND FOOD TRADE

Case Study: India Responds to International Food Safety Requirements

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2020
VISION

FOR FOOD, AGRICULTURE,
AND THE ENVIRONMENT

FOCUS 10 • BRIEF 11 OF 17 • SEPTEMBER 2003

As awareness grows about food safety issues, the need for countries to provide greater assurance about the safety and quality of food also grows. The increase in world food trade and the advent of the Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) Agreement under the World Trade Organization (WTO) have also raised interest in food safety requirements. To ensure a strong presence in global markets, India realizes the need to meet these challenges and keep pace with international developments. This brief reviews (1) how India utilizes the international framework for food safety standards set forth by the Codex Alimentarius Commission (hereafter referred to as Codex), and (2) how India provides safety assurances for exports and promotes access to international markets for exporters.

CODEX STANDARDS AND INDIA'S FOOD SAFETY SYSTEM

The SPS Agreement provides for harmonization of the SPS measures of member countries with the international standards set by Codex. The Agreement, however, allows members to lay down more stringent standards than those of Codex, providing they can be scientifically justified (see Brief 5).

In India, international standards, guidelines, and recommendations are increasingly used to guide domestic as well as international trade. The Directorate General of Health Services in the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare is working to integrate Codex standards into national food laws as much as possible. Where specific local needs justify more stringent requirements, specifications are being fixed based on scientific data. India is now reorienting its food laws to emphasize food safety as well as food quality. National standards for both domestic and export trade lay down parameters for pesticide residues, antibiotic residues, heavy metals, aflatoxin, pathogens, and other contaminants.

The Export Inspection Council of India (EIC), the official certification body for exports, is developing standards for exports based mainly on Codex, but it also takes into account that an importing country may impose stiffer requirements.

Because Codex standards are increasingly used as a benchmark for global trade, India has increased its participation in several Codex committees to ensure that domestic conditions are reflected in the development of international safety standards, thereby facilitating acceptance of Indian products in global markets. At Codex meetings, India has proposed that risk assessment studies be conducted in developing countries and that the resulting data be taken into consideration when framing Codex standards. Within India, risk analysis and setting of national standards are supported by new data generated at several research institutes.

The Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point (HACCP) approach has been recognized by Codex as a tool for assessing hazards and establishing control systems that focus on preventive measures rather than relying primarily on end-product testing. Besides incorporating the HACCP approach into the

new hygienic codes, Codex is developing guidelines for applying HACCP systems to small or less-developed businesses. The Codex HACCP and food-hygiene standards have been adopted by the Bureau of Indian Standards, the national standards body in India. Food processing units are being encouraged to adopt these systems on a voluntary basis.

EXPORT INSPECTION AND CERTIFICATION

In view of the import controls being imposed by importing countries, export controls have acquired renewed relevance. Export certification, which had been made voluntary with liberalization, has once again been made mandatory by the Indian government in sensitive areas such as marine, milk, meat, poultry, and egg products and honey.

Inspection and certification in India has a regulatory basis in the form of the Export (Quality Control and Inspection) Act of 1963. The EIC was set up under this Act with statutory status to certify the quality of products for exports. Under the EIC, there are five Export Inspection Agencies (at New Delhi, Kolkata, Kochi, Chennai, and Mumbai) that carry out inspection and certification activities, with 41 suboffices and laboratories to provide backup. All inspection agencies are gearing up to implement ISO 17020, "General Criteria for the Operation of Various Types of Bodies Performing Inspection," issued by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO), as well as the Codex "Guidelines for the Design, Operation, Assessment, and Accreditation of Food Import and Export Inspection and Certification Systems."

The main system of export inspection and certification being followed in the Indian food sector is the Food Safety Management Systems-based Certification (FSMSC), which is founded on international standards including HACCP, Good Management Practices (GMP), and Good Hygiene Practices (GHP). Under this certification system, exporting firms are approved based on an assessment of how they measure up against international requirements. Approval is normally granted for two years, and the responsibility for maintaining quality lies with the firm. However, periodic surveillance, in the form of monitoring visits, supervisory visits, and corporate audits, is carried out to ensure continued conformity to the requirements. Through this system, international requirements are met and rejections reduced at the importing end.

All units approved by EIC necessarily have to implement HACCP/GMP/GHP at all stages of food production, in addition to meeting end-product requirements. There are also various export promotion bodies under the Ministry of Commerce and Industries that assist processors in implementing safety and quality-control systems. Today more than 1,000 units in India have been certified for HACCP, of which at least 400 are under compulsory export certification.

The export certification system is based on an HACCP approach that requires the processor to deal with the hazards

arising from contaminants in the raw material as well as during processing. Surveillance involves checking hygienic conditions in and records maintained by the units, and drawing and testing samples for various contaminants to ensure safety of the product.

The SPS Agreement encourages member countries to recognize the concept of equivalence in different safety measures. If the exporting member objectively demonstrates to the importing member that its measures achieve the importing member's appropriate level of sanitary or phytosanitary protection, the importing member is obliged to accept these measures. India is seeking equivalence agreements with the health authorities of major trading partners. The EIC has already been designated a competent authority by the European Commission (EC) for marine products and basmati rice and by the U.S. for black pepper. For these commodities the EIC has the authority to approve unit exports. It is awaiting similar recognition from the EC for egg, milk, and poultry products. The EIC has also signed equivalence agreements with Australia for marine products and with Sri Lanka for 86 items. It is negotiating an agreement in various sectors with Singapore and will soon have an agreement with Italy.

Under such agreements, in addition to recognition of EIC certification, both sides will exchange information on specifications, methods of sampling, inspections and tests, provisions for retest and appeal in case of rejections, and return of rejected consignments. Such agreements facilitate trade and also lead to less frequent inspection and rejection of India's products in overseas markets.

To meet these obligations, India needs to strengthen its regulatory framework. This process would include upgrading testing facilities to meet international as well as importing-country requirements; upgrading human capabilities or empowering personnel in areas of testing, risk analysis, and development and auditing of HACCP plans; developing GMP/GHP/HACCP modules for implementation at both domestic and export levels; and establishing databases on requirements of importing countries.

India is either funding these upgrades itself or seeking assistance under programs funded by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) or the EC. Initiatives include

- **Upgrading of laboratories.** Laboratories are being strengthened in terms of equipment, manpower, and systems. The EIC laboratories used for export testing have been furnished with state-of-the-art instruments. To meet the requirements for testing, specifically for testing for chloramphenicol, nitrofurans, and other antibiotics, the EIC labs and five other government labs now have the capability to test at 0.02 parts per billion.
- **Training and technical assistance.** Training efforts in India focus on developing and upgrading skills of industry and government personnel. A Human Resource and Quality Development Centre has been established under the EIC. It offers EIC certification personnel a chance to keep abreast of the latest developments and take training programs for

implementing and monitoring food-product certification. Similar training and awareness programs are being organized for industry on various issues, including HACCP, testing, milk quality, and rice quality.

- **Establishing a database on importing-country requirements.** Information on regulations and specifications regarding methods of sampling, inspection, and testing in various countries is often unavailable or available only in the language of the importing country. This lack of clarity about specific requirements can sometimes lead to rejection at the point of import. EIC is building a database of requirements of major import partners that can be accessed by exporters. Technical assistance in this area has been sought from the EC.

Some importing countries are imposing unjust measures that conflict with Codex and impede trade. Some of these measures include applying standards more stringent than Codex without carrying out a risk analysis, destroying nonconforming consignments, imposing new requirements without notification or information, and applying test methods that may be different from internationally specified ones. To work out solutions to such issues, India is entering into dialogue with importing governments.

CONCLUSION

The safety measures described here have led to increased export of food products and fewer inspections and rejections. The impact has been especially significant in the marine sector, in which export certification has been in operation since 1997. In other areas such as milk and egg products, in which certification has only recently been introduced, efforts are still underway to obtain recognition of Indian certification by the EC, Australia, and other countries so that Indian products can gain access to these markets.

In spite of all of the measures taken by India and other developing countries to improve quality and strengthen safety systems, rejections by developed countries continue as they impose additional, new, and often unjustifiable SPS requirements. Such requirements include testing a wider range of antibiotic residues, destroying rejected consignments, specifying requirements without scientific justification, and using highly sensitive test methods based on testing capability rather than scientific need. These measures raise testing costs and lower competitiveness of exports from developing countries.

India is trying to take advantage of WTO nontariff agreements to address these obstacles. Thereby, Indian producers are hoping to gain further access to global markets while providing safe products. Developed countries need to recognize these efforts and make their own efforts to facilitate trade, rather than to impose new nontariff measures to protect their producers. ■

For further information see the Export Inspection Council website at <www.eicindia.org>.

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