



ASSOCIATE PARLIAMENTARY FOOD & HEALTH FORUM



Food Scares

Tuesday, 28 June 2005

Committee Room 15, House of Commons

CHAIRMAN: Lord Rea

SPEAKERS: Dr Clair Baynton, Head of the Novel Foods, Additives and Supplements Division of the Food Standards Agency.

Ms Michelle Smyth, Principal Public Affairs Officer for Which?

APOLOGIES: Johnny Dennis, Sarah Freeman, Baroness Gardner, Dr Evan Harris, Lord Lindsay, Chrissie Nicholls, Hilary Parsons and Peter Roberts.

Introduction

1. Lord Rea welcomed members to the meeting and introduced Dr Clair Baynton and Ms Michelle Smyth. He referred to the political difficulties faced by the previous Government in relation to food scares and welcomed the Government's decision to establish the Food Standards Agency (FSA). He said that some two thirds of the Forum's meetings were on the subject of nutrition; such issues attracted less attention than sensational food scares.

Dr Clair Baynton

Introduction

2. Clair Baynton (CB) began by referring to the Government's decision to establish the FSA in 2000, in the wake of a series of food scares. She told members that the FSA had no responsibility for the food industry, which is the responsibility of DEFRA, and said the FSA was responsible for protecting consumer interests in relation to food.

FSA's approach

3. CB told Forum members that the FSA deals with many different food issues, but applies consistent standards: following the precautionary principle; putting the needs of the consumer first; making decisions and taking action in proportion to the evidence base; acting quickly when necessary, being consistent, behaving in an open and transparent manner. While it is not possible to eliminate risk completely, the Agency's approach focuses on risk reduction.

FSA research

4. CB explained that the FSA carries out quite a lot of research into public attitudes towards food safety. They have found that members of the public recognise that it is an important issue, but it is not a high priority for most consumers. People want a trusted source of information they can rely on. Consumers want to trust the food industry, but they are not sure if they can. Members of the public are quite suspicious of the media, but they are willing to trust experts, particularly if comments are based on scientific evidence.

Sudan 1

5. CB commented on the background to the Sudan 1 food scare, explaining that it was illegal to use this dye in food, but it had been added to certain products to provide additional colour. The first example of Sudan 1 being used in food was in relation to chilli powder in 2003 and regulations were introduced in 2003 to tackle this problem. The regulations were then extended, as misuse widened, to cover curry powder in 2004 and Curcuma and virgin Palm Oil, for direct consumption, in 2005.

Risk Assessment

6. CB said the Sudan 1 incident in February 2005 was the largest incident the FSA had had to deal with. It involved a highly complex food chain and the FSA didn't initially anticipate the large number of products that would be affected. It had been a challenge for the FSA to trace all the products involved, for example, Worcester Sauce had been affected because it contained chilli powder.
7. Sudan dyes have been shown to cause cancer. Although the risk is thought to be low, it has not been possible to quantify it. For this reason the FSA has decided that the presence of Sudan in food is not acceptable at any level.

Risk Management

8. CB told Members that responsibility for action in relation to contaminated food products in the European Union rests with Member States. The UK and several other Member States acted to remove contaminated food products and informed consumers. Some Member States, such as the Netherlands, removed products but did not provide consumers with the relevant information.

Dioxins

9. CB said that dioxins are widespread environmental pollutants, found in salmon. The FSA had been able to establish a threshold at which they are not dangerous for humans and this had informed their guidance to consumers. She pointed out that it can be difficult to send an accurate and clear message to consumers. The FSA had issued separate guidelines for consumers at different life-stages: for example, one aimed at young women and women who were or might become pregnant (for whom the risk of dioxins is higher because they could cause damage to an unborn child) and another for children.

Latest Developments

10. The European Food Standards Agency has set up a working group to consider the harmonisation of testing methods for testing dyes in different products.

11. The FSA hope the European Commission will propose harmonised risk management procedures for food dyes.
12. The FSA is planning an external review of how it managed the Sudan 1 incident so that it can learn lessons for the future.
13. The FSA has just set up a taskforce with the objective of strengthening controls in the food chain. It held its first meeting in June and the FSA hopes that it will lead to a reduction in the number of food incidents that occur in the UK.

Ms Michelle Smyth

Introduction

14. Ms Michelle Smyth (MS) told Forum members that she wanted to focus on the public's perceptions of food scare issues and the work of Which?.
15. MS explained that Which? had campaigned for a very long time on food scare issues - indeed it had campaigned for the establishment of the FSA - and she cited the work of their former Director, Sheila McKecknie. Which? – formerly known as the Consumers' Association – is the largest consumer association in the EU and it is funded by its members and subscribers. It is fiercely independent of the Government and of the food industry. Which? is a member of the European Consumer Associations group, BEUC, Consumers International and the Transatlantic Consumer Dialogue.
16. MS advocated a number of principles which should be adhered to in relation to food scares, including: the precautionary principle; openness and transparency both in risk management and in the communication process; and public dialogue. Which? feels it is very important that the public understand the reasons for the decisions being taken by the authorities and that the authorities' decisions are informed by an understanding of the public's concerns.
17. MS made the point that life always has an element of risk and the task of the FSA is to quantify risk in relation to food products and assess what level of risk is acceptable.
18. MS said that Which? had welcomed the establishment of the FSA, the openness and transparency of its scientific committees and its involvement in its work of stakeholder groups. Which? believes the advent of the FSA, and its working style, represents a sea change in attitude on the part of the authorities. Though this does not mean that there isn't room for improvement.

Research into Public Perception of Food Scares

19. People want open, transparent and inclusive decision making as to acceptable levels of risk. MS referred to the example of BSE and sheep as being a good example of the way in which a clear message had been conveyed about the uncertainties of the potential risk. MS also referred to an important conclusion of the inquiry into BSE and beef, "that the public should be trusted to respond rationally to information".
20. MS said that the main sources of information used by the public are television, newspapers, magazines and the internet, of which the internet was the most trusted course of advice.

21. Food scares need to be put in context. Which incidents are the most dangerous and how dangerous are they? Which? would like the FSA to contradict irresponsible and inaccurate food scare stories in the media.
22. Which? would also like the FSA to make use of a wider range of communication tools. MS made the point that at the height of the Sudan 1 food scare the FSA website provided consumers with useful information but wasn't able to cope with the level of demand and crashed.

Lessons for the Future

23. Which? believes that food scares information needs to be regularly updated and reiterated to ensure that messages are accurately conveyed to, and fully understood by, the public.
24. Which? agrees with the FSA about the need for greater harmonisation of information for consumers across the European Union.
25. Referring to the example of GM foods, MS made the point that people don't always see food issues in black and white terms and their concerns need to be fitted into the risk management and communication processes. Which? believes this is a priority for the FSA to take forward.

Questions

The media and food scare incidents

26. **Baroness Gibson of Market Rasen** raised the issue of media management on the part of the FSA, including the importance of establishing the facts and achieving balanced reporting as opposed to sensational food scare reports.
27. CB explained that the FSA does provide factual information, although the media were not always receptive to it, but she didn't consider the FSA should respond to every headline. CB did say that sometimes the FSA puts information on its website to make clear its attitude to food scares.
28. MS said that Which? is selective about the food scare enquiries to which it responds. Its priority is not to become involved in apportioning blame, which is a secondary issue, but to establish the facts, disseminate accurate information and, if necessary, get products withdrawn.
29. **Lord Rea** wondered if the FSA had the equivalent of a "rebuttal team". CB said that the FSA has a very good communications division and, in the case of the Sudan 1 incident, it had set up a dedicated telephone helpline team to answer the flood of enquiries which it received from members of the public. The FSA press office had continued to deal with the media.

The ethics of campaigning pressure groups.

30. **Peter Sanguinetti of the Crop Protection Association**, noted that the FSA was highly regarded by consumers, and referred to a former Chairman of the FSA who had questioned the ethics of some pressure groups, which he thought made exaggerated claims in order to garner support. He asked CB whether there should be a code of ethics for pressure groups, especially with regard to the internet.
31. CB did not wish to be drawn on the wider question, but said that people are entitled to their opinion.

The proactive work of the FSA

32. **Baroness Miller of Chilthorne Dormer** referred to the value of the proactive work of the FSA, for example in its “Sid the Slug” campaign to persuade people to reduce their salt intake, and made the point that this, perhaps, achieved a greater benefit than their reactive work on food scare issues. She asked CB whether the FSA or the Department of Health (DH) determined the priority given to this work.
33. CB said the FSA had recently published its new strategic plan, having consulted stakeholders. The plan, including the reduction of salt target, reflects the concerns of the FSA and its stakeholders. The Agency works together closely with DH, and other government departments, on a range of issues.
34. MS agreed that there are grey areas in which it is difficult to judge whether the FSA or DH, or indeed DEFRA and the DfES, should take a lead on issues. Which? calls for a joined up, collaborative approach to food scares and food related issues in general.

Food scares and crisis management

35. **Robert Pickard (RP) of the British Nutrition Foundation** said that the FSA had been “a breath of fresh air” and done a very good job in putting the needs of consumers first. He also considered the FSA had done a good job in helping consumers identify which products are high in fat, sugar and salt. He suggested that the FSA had been a bit late in sharing information when there is a food scare and wondered whether the FSA organised crisis management rehearsals and, if not, suggested they might benefit from doing so. He also suggested that other organisations with a relevant interest, such as consumer, nutrition and medical organisations, would be willing to post FSA information on their own websites during incidents when there was a danger of the FSA website being overwhelmed.
36. CB acknowledged that there had been problems in accessing the FSA website during the Sudan 1 food scare and said that the FSA were reviewing access to the website in emergencies. CB said the FSA has an incident response team and she understood they rehearse scenarios for different types of incidents. She also thought that this was an issue that could usefully be addressed during the external review of the FSA’s management of the Sudan 1 incident.
37. RP then asked if the FSA would trust an external organisation, such as Which?, to disseminate information on its behalf and he asked MS if Which? Would be willing to do so.
38. CB and MS agreed that each organisation would need to consider whether to adopt a collaborative response on a case by case basis. MS added that she thought crisis management rehearsals on the part of the FSA would be valuable and that these should also be undertaken on a European scale with EFSA, involving key stakeholders.
39. **Richard Wood of the British Retail Consortium** made the point that BSE had not been found in sheep and that there was only a theoretical risk.
40. **Lord Rea** asked for confirmation of the advice from the FSA that the public should avoid sausages whose skins were derived from sheep. MS and CB confirmed that was correct, in accordance with the precautionary principle.

41. **Nigel Dickie of Counsel Ltd** asked CB and FSA to comment on the different approach taken by different EU Member States to food scare issues. CB and MS both agreed that consumers should have the best possible information made available to them so that they could make informed choices. They both thought that UK consumers had been fully advised in relation to Sudan 1.
42. **Lord Rea** wondered whether there were commercial reasons for the decision taken by other Member States not to identify products affected by the Sudan 1 risk, but simply to withdraw them. CB was unaware of any specific commercial basis for the decisions taken by other Member States, but made the point that the FSA always faces an element of risk when it makes statements about individual firms' products.
43. **Claire MacEvily, representing Medical Research Council Human Nutrition Research**, asked whether the FSA had done any research into the relative risk of food scares in comparison with poor nutrition or road safety. CB was unable to comment in detail on this, but said the FSA had asked general questions about food scares and food safety issues.
44. **Steve Batchford of Brakes** asked if relative risks could be put in context to help the public and reduce the sensationalism of media reporting. CB said it was difficult to quantify risk and to put it into context, but the FSA did try to keep the public well informed.
45. **David Wroe of Princes Food** asked whether there were lines of communication between the various non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to help them agree a joint response to food scares. He suggested that greater co-ordination would be valuable given the amount of conflicting and confusing information which surrounds food scares. MS said there was no proactive policy to achieve this and no forum for a co-ordinated response, but she made the point that the various NGOs were well known to each other and attended many of the same meetings. Which? tends to go straight to the FSA when there is a food scare in order to establish the facts. MS also made the point that all stakeholders should be involved in responding to food scares, not just consumer associations.
46. **Lord Rea** asked for further information to clarify whether the risk of dioxin in fish occurred in farmed and/or wild fish. He also asked whether lessons could be learnt from this problem to help avoid contamination of food in the future.
47. CB did not wish to comment in detail on the dioxin in fish problem because she had not been directly involved in this matter. **Robert Pickard** explained that dioxin contamination had occurred in farmed fish, but that wild, free swimming fish were subject to other risks such as mercury contamination. He said that many experts advised people to eat short-lived fish, before they were at risk of contamination, such as sardines and mackerel, and made the point that nutrition is all about optimising the intake of beneficial foods. At some levels certain foods are good for people, but taken in excessive quantities they can become harmful. RP made a plea for greater education of the public about food and cooking.
48. Lord Rea, CB and MS all agreed that improving education about food and cooking would be helpful and that the DfES should be more involved in supporting the health messages from other organisations, such as the FSA and the Department of Health.

Conclusion of the meeting

49. **Lord Rea** thanked the speakers. He congratulated the FSA on tackling food scare problems very effectively and thanked Which? for keeping the public well informed. Lord Rea also

reminded members that the Forum would hold its AGM on 18th October and expected to hold a meeting on Farming, Nutrition and Supermarkets immediately after that meeting. He said the Forum aimed to have regular meetings once every six weeks, but would also hold ad hoc meetings as necessary.