

AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND MINISTERIAL FORUM ON FOOD REGULATION

COMMUNIQUÉ

28 April 2017

Australian Ministers, the New Zealand Minister responsible for food safety and the Australian Local Government Association met in Adelaide today and agreed the priority areas for the food regulation system for both countries for 2017 – 2021.

The meeting was chaired by the Australian Government Assistant Minister for Health, Dr David Gillespie.

The Australian and New Zealand Ministerial Forum on Food Regulation is responsible for maintaining a strong food regulation system that is based on scientific evidence and expertise and is focused on protecting the health and safety of consumers.

At the meeting today Ministers discussed a range of food regulation issues, including finalising their investigation into low-tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) hemp seeds as a food.

They also discussed the latest updates on food labelling of sugar and fats and oils and released the two year progress review report on the implementation of the Health Star Rating system.

Outcomes from the meeting included:

Food Regulation System priorities for 2017 - 2021

Ministers agreed the food regulation system is producing strong food safety outcomes overall, and identified three priority areas for 2017 – 2021 to further strengthen the system:

- To **reduce foodborne illness**, particularly related to *Campylobacter* and *Salmonella*, with a nationally-consistent approach. Ministers requested the development of a draft national strategy, noting New Zealand has an existing *Campylobacter* strategy, for consideration at the next Forum meeting that outlines specific interventions across the food supply chain to reduce foodborne illness associated with *Campylobacter* and *Salmonella*. This strategy is to be developed in collaboration with industry, includes improved transparency through monitoring across the food chain, be based on contemporary evidence, and engages the community.
- To **support the public health objectives** to reduce chronic disease related to overweight and obesity. This will include evaluating the effectiveness of existing initiatives and identify potential new initiatives, such as how the food regulation system can facilitate healthy food choices and positively influence the food environment.
- To **maintain a strong, robust and agile food regulation system** that gives confidence to consumers that their food is safe, and that the system can manage new and innovative industry approaches.

By being proactive the food regulation system will not only better protect consumers, it will also support the food industry to meet consumer demands.

Low-THC Hemp seeds as a Food

Ministers received a report by the Swinburne University of Technology regarding consumption of low THC foods and the effect on random drug testing protocols in Australia and New Zealand (the Consumption Report).

Ministers had requested that the Food Regulation Standing Committee (FRSC) investigate information gaps identified in considering the adoption of low-THC hemp seeds as a food. These covered marketing and labelling issues, legal and Treaty implications, maximum levels of cannabidiol(CBD) and the potential effects on road side drug testing.

Ministers noted the key finding of the Consumption Report is that it is highly unlikely that consumption of food products containing the levels of THC tested would result in any positive tests on oral fluid, blood or urine.

In light of these findings Ministers supported the draft standard that will allow low-THC hemp seeds to be sold as a food. The standard will take effect six months after it has been gazetted and Ministers acknowledged that there is still a range of New Zealand and State and Territory legislation that currently prohibits the sale of low-THC hemp seeds as a food which will need to be amended. Ministers also supported the establishment of an Implementation and Monitoring working group.

Review of mandatory fortification of bread – final report

Ministers received the final report on the evaluation of mandatory fortification of bread. The Report provides a comprehensive assessment of the overall effectiveness of the mandatory folic acid fortification initiative in Australia, and the mandatory iodine fortification initiative in both Australia and New Zealand.

Ministers are very pleased that both of the mandatory fortification initiatives have achieved the following objectives:

- Mandatory folic acid fortification of wheat flour for bread making has reduced the incidence of Neural Tube Defects in Australia.
- Mandatory iodine fortification of bread has addressed the re-emergence of mild iodine deficiency in the general populations of Australia and New Zealand and has led to iodine sufficiency at the population level in both countries.

Ministers acknowledged industries' contribution toward these important public health outcomes.

Sugar Labelling

Ministers, at their November 2016 meeting, requested Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ), in consultation with the FRSC, to prepare a program of work to further investigate labelling approaches to providing information on sugars.

Ministers agreed to the work program that includes further evidence gathering activities by FSANZ on consumer understanding and behaviour, international approaches to sugar labelling, and an update of the policy context by the Australian Government Department of Health, to cover the broader policy context in relation to sugar. That work is expected to be presented at the Forum's next meeting in November 2017.

Fats and Oils

Ministers considered the labelling of specific sources of fats and oils in order to better protect the health and safety of consumers.

In November 2016, Ministers requested that FRSC clarify the policy issue in relation to naming sources of fats and oils to enable consumers to make informed choices in support of the dietary guidelines,

Ministers agreed to extend the scope of this project to cover all parts of the food label, including the identification of all fats and oils and to proceed with the development of regulatory and non-regulatory options. The residual issues, such as additional consumer research will also be undertaken as part of this next stage with a progress report to be provided at the next Forum meeting.

Health Star Rating System update and 2 year progress review

Ministers were very pleased to hear that as at April 2017, there are now at least 140 companies that have adopted the Health Star Rating (HSR) system; with more than 7,000 products displaying the HSR system graphic in Australia, and more than 2,700 in New Zealand .

Today Ministers endorsed a two year progress review report on the implementation of the HSR system (June 2014 – June 2016). The report highlights the rapid uptake of the HSR system and good adherence to the HSR guidance documents by industry, and increasing awareness and use of the HSR system by consumers. The report also indicates that the HSR system is encouraging manufacturers to reformulate with several companies changing product formulations in order to obtain a higher star rating. The report will be available on the HSR website shortly*.

Ministers also noted that a more recent Australian survey of 1,000 respondents indicated: continuing increases in consumer awareness of the system with 68% of people aware of the HSR system; and continuing and sustained behaviour change with 44% of those aware of the HSR system having bought products with a higher HSR than their regular purchases and 73% of these people continuing to purchase these products.

The five year review of the HSR system is continuing with Ministers noting the Terms of Reference. The Terms of Reference will also be made available on the HSR website. A formal public submission process is also expected to be released shortly.

Ministers also noted suggestion from stakeholders to improve the system including ‘as prepared’ rule. Ministers asked the HSR Advisory Committee to address these concerns as a matter of priority.

Next Meeting

The next face to face meeting of the Forum is currently scheduled for 24 November 2017 in Melbourne.

Visit the food regulation website for further information on food regulation activities – www.foodregulation.gov.au.

* The two year progress review report on the implementation of the Health Star Rating system will shortly be made public <http://www.healthstarrating.gov.au/internet/healthstarrating/publishing.nsf/Content/reviews>

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