Ministers responsible for food regulation in Australia and New Zealand met in Melbourne today where they finalised a draft Intergovernmental Agreement that will assist Australian consumers and industry to understand food regulation in Australia.

Chaired by the Australian Parliamentary Secretary for Health, Mark Butler, members of the Australia and New Zealand Food Regulation Ministerial Council discussed the various components of the Agreement which is designed to provide nationally consistent and useful information on food standards, which has been identified by industry and the public as a major issue of concern.

“It is important that all sections of the community understand our food standards and that as far as possible that the way we regulate food be nationally consistent,” Mr Butler said.

“The Ministerial Council is developing this agreement at the request of the Council of Australian Government (COAG) which has identified the need for food regulation reform as a national priority.

“The Ministerial Council members agreed today that the engagement of all Australian jurisdictions was essential to the effective implementation of a centralised advice system and Australia and New Zealand are working cooperatively towards a joint approach. This draft Agreement will now go to COAG for their consideration,” Mr Butler said.

Other issues discussed by the Ministerial Council today included:

Regulation of Caffeinated Energy Drinks

The Ministerial Council noted the progress on work relating to concerns raised with caffeinated energy drinks. The development of a bi-national compliance strategy for caffeinated energy drinks is almost completed. The National Health and Medical Research Council is reviewing the current scientific evidence on the effects of caffeine consumption.
Progress of the Review of Food Labelling Law and Policy

The Ministerial Council received a progress update on the Food Labelling Law and Policy Review.

Following the publication of the issues Consultation Paper on 5 March, public consultation meetings have been held in Perth, Wellington, Christchurch, Sydney, Hobart, Canberra, Darwin, Victoria, Adelaide and Melbourne. The consultation meeting in Brisbane today concludes public consultation however; interested stakeholders have until the 14 May 2010 to make a written submission to the Review. The Review Committee is using an evidence based approach in order to ensure that the recommendations are backed by robust support which will withstand critical review.

The Ministerial Council today urged all interested people to provide their ideas to the Review by 14th May at www.foodlabellingreview.gov.au. Submissions and further research will be used to develop a draft report that will include recommendations and the rational underpinning of these. The final report is due to the Ministerial Council in late 2010 and to COAG in early 2011.

Bisphenol A (BPA)

The Ministerial Council considered a report by Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) on Bisphenol A (BPA) - chemicals used in the plastics industry in baby bottles and food containers - and requested that the Chair provide a report back to the next Ministerial Council meeting about:

- developments in the US, including information from the FDA’s further assessments of the safety of BPA; and
- the actions taken or being considered by relevant Australian Industry, particularly in light of international developments, including actions taken by the USFDA and American industry.

Fresh Meat Country of Origin Labelling

The Ministerial Council also noted that Mark Butler, on 9 March 2010 asked FSANZ to consider a Proposal to review the Country of Origin Labelling standard with a view to removing its inconsistency in application across unpackaged meat, particularly in beef.

Media contact: Kay McNiece, Ministerial Council, 0412 132 585.