

UPDATE: CODEX ALIMENTARIUS

by
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Codex Alimentarius—literally means “food codes”—constitute an emerging set of food standards that are being developed on an international basis under the joint auspices of the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

The administrative organization for this program, which was established in 1962, is the Codex Alimentarius Commission. Membership in the Commission is open to the member nations of WHO and FAO. The Commission has held 12 sessions, the most recent having been held in April 1976. Sessions alternate between Rome and Geneva. Membership of the Commission is currently 114 countries in geographic locations of Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, North America and Southwest Pacific delineated as follows: Africa—31 countries; Asia—26 countries; Europe—29 countries; Latin America—22 countries; North America—2 countries; Southwest Pacific—4 countries.

The purpose of the work of the Commission, which is an intergovernmental body, is to protect consumers against health hazards in food and against fraud; to insure fair practices in the food trade; to facilitate international trade in foods; to determine priorities; to initiate and to guide the preparation of draft standards through, and with, the aid of appropriate organizations; and to finalize standards and, after acceptance by governments, publish them in a Codex Alimentarius either as regional or worldwide standards.

The Commission has embarked on an extensive program of work covering the compositional, labeling, additive, contaminant, pesticide residues, hygiene, sampling and analysis aspects of foods. It has set out to secure international agreement on the substance of food standards and then invite governments to accept them as outlined in the General Principles of the Codex Alimentarius. The implementation of the program of work of the Commission is achieved mainly through the expertise contained in its subsidiary bodies which are also intergovernmental in character. There are 25 subsidiary bodies of the Commission which advise on the general orientation and program of work of the Commission and is divided into three broad subject groups: general subject, commodity,

and regional coordinating committees.

Most of the subsidiary bodies of the Commission have chairmen and hosts by Member Governments, which have undertaken this work at their expense. The Governments of Austria, Canada, Denmark, Federal Republic of Germany, France, Ghana, Hungary, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom and United States are hosts to 20 of the 25 Commission's subsidiary committees.

The general subject matters dealt with by the Commission include general principles of the Codex Alimentarius, food additives, pesticide residues, food hygiene, meat hygiene, food labeling, and methods of analysis and sampling. Commodities for which international standards have, or, are being elaborated, include milk and milk products, fruit juices, quick-frozen foods, cocoa products and chocolate, fats and oils, processed fruits and vegetables, meat, processed meat products, fish and fishery products, foods for special dietary uses, soups and broths, edible ices and natural mineral waters. Matters being dealt with by the regional coordinating committees in the developing regions include the establishment of a model food law and regulations, ways and means of improving food control services and the consideration, for possible standardization, of products of particular interest to the regions.

Some 130 international food standards covering a wide range of food commodities have now been established. Twenty-one additional standards were adopted at the last session and sent to governments for acceptance. Among them that would be of interest were quick-frozen and canned fish and fishery products, and processed meat products (canned corned beef and luncheon meat). Close to 200 international maximum residue limits for pesticide residues were adopted at the last session of the Commission and eight international codes of practice were also adopted. They included a code of ante- and post-mortem inspection of slaughter animals, codes of hygienic practice covering fresh meat, processed meat products, egg products and poultry processing, codes

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of practice for fresh and canned fish and the processing and handling of quick-frozen foods.

Specifically, how is a standard elaborated?

The Commission decides that a standard should be elaborated and sets up a Codex committee or entrusts the elaboration to some other body. The Codex committee or other body produces a draft which at this stage is a "*proposed draft standard*." It is circulated to governments for comments and may be considered and further amended, in the case of a regional or group of countries proposal by the appropriate coordinating committee, if one exists, or otherwise, by the Codex committee or other body. It is then presented to the Commission as a "*proposed draft standard*" and the Commission uses it as the basis for producing a "*draft standard*." This is sent to governments for comments and in the light of these comments, and, after further consideration by the Coordinating Committee or Codex Committee or other body, as the case may be, the Commission reconsiders the draft and adopts it as a "*recommended standard*." This is sent to governments for acceptance and is published in the Codex Alimentarius as a *Codex Standard*, when the Commission determines that it is appropriate to do so in the light of the acceptances received.

To reach the adoption stage these standards go through several stages of development. After the need for such a standard has been established, work proceeds in "steps" until "step nine" is reached (which represents 9-10 years of work). The draft standard is then finally submitted to the Commission and, if adopted, is submitted to member countries for acceptance and incorporation into their own food regulations.

I represent the industry, on behalf of the American Meat Institute, as a member of the United States delegation on the Meat Hygiene Committee and the Processed Meats Committee. The work of the Meat Hygiene Committee, of which New Zealand is host meets in London because of travel, is essentially completed. The Processed Meats Committee, of which Denmark is host, meets regularly every 18 months in Copenhagen. At the most recent meeting in December 1976, Draft Standards were completed for:

- Cooked cured ham
- Cooked cured pork shoulder
- Cooked cured chopped meat

These will be forwarded to the Commission for consideration in July.

The following will be considered at the next meeting of the Processed Meats Committee, which will be in the Spring of 1978.

1. Mechanically deboned meat.
2. High and low temperature rendered meat.
3. Microbiological specifications for processed meat products.
4. Collagen-free meat protein levels in meat products.
5. Code of hygienic practice for game.
6. Protein of fat-free basis to determine added substance.
7. Non-meat proteins in meat products.
8. Processed poultry products.
9. Labeling including qualifying descriptions of products similar to those covered by standards elaborated by the Committee.
10. Hygienic and microbiological requirements for dry and semi-dry sausage and other dry products. U.S. and Italian delegations agreed to prepare a position paper.

The recommendations of the Codex Alimentarius Commission are the product of years of technical discussions and negotiations in the intergovernmental subsidiary bodies of the Commission. By the time the international standards are adopted by the Commission for issue to governments for acceptance, they already have received a wide measure of general acceptability and the different national legislative provisions on the contents of the standards have been fully discussed and, in most cases, acceptable compromises agreed upon. Its recommendations in the area of food safety take account of specialist advice provided by panels of experts eminent in their fields.

Developing countries and industrialized countries can all benefit from the work of the Commission. Its international standards, including maximum limits for pesticide residues, its codes of hygienic and technological practice, its lists of food additives evaluated for safety in use, its lists of specifications of identity and purity of food additives, its maximum limits for contaminants and, lately, its work in furtherance of a model food law and regulations for developing countries, all provide a very sound basis for national legislation and regulations. Developing countries, in particular, can benefit from the availability of such a body of recommendations bearing the stamp of competent international approval, always recognizing that

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some adjustments in the content of standards may be necessary at the national level to take account of local circumstances. The recommendations can be used as the basis for national practices with the object of protecting consumers against health risks and fraud and against substandard products whether home-produced or imported. They also promote the food industry and give them increasing ability to export to countries with highly developed food legislation and the means of enforcing it. The industrialized countries can also benefit from many of the recommendations of the Commission. More especially, in the area of health protection and from a freer flow of international trade, as far as food standards matters are concerned, they are expected to follow the progressive acceptance and enactment in national legislation of the international standards and other recommendations of the Commission.

DISCUSSION

LARRY BORCHERT: Thank you R. B. We have time for a couple of questions. Does anyone have anything to ask on Codex Alimentarius? You mentioned that it took 11 years to develop the code. What were the biggest drawbacks? I can see just people talking to people could be one, but are there any technical problems involved here?

R. B. SLEETH: Really, they all are technical in nature. Many times it gets down to the point of dotting the i's and crossing the t's literally. If you take into consideration that we have 30-35 different countries participating, each of which are producing a specific product differently, it is very, very difficult to get general agreement on what the temperature

should be, what the packaging material should be, how it should be this, that and the other kind of thing. In addition, it takes a long period of time, after we work through a specific session and come up with what we think is our best recommendation as far as a standard is concerned and then get this out to the various governments, to get it back and accumulate the comments. As I indicated earlier, we only hold these sessions about every 18 months because of that. I also mentioned the fact of language barriers, particularly with the developing countries. Many times it takes just a day to explain to some of the delegates what is going on. It does take a very very long time and it is a very tedious program to go through.

DOUG RHODES: If you lay down standards in very great detail such that composition and temperature and processing and packaging and such and such are defined tightly, and then if you come along with the addition of a new product or a new component you will find that you cannot put it in because it is not in the legislation, it is not in the standard. Then you will have to go back to Codex to get permission to make something new.

R. B. SLEETH: Well, keep in mind though, Doug, these standards are elaborated generally to control international trade. If a country accepts a Codex standard, it does not prohibit you from doing what is generally already recognized as a procedure to follow in your own country. It is generally to control an incoming product to the United States as well as what we would export to other countries. It would not, in my judgment, affect new product development for use as far as the United States is concerned or for domestic trade but it would international trade.