



SECOND FAO/WHO GLOBAL FORUM OF FOOD SAFETY REGULATORS
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**RAPID ALERT SYSTEM FOR FOOD AND FEED (RASFF) IN THE EUROPEAN UNION
AND ITS POSSIBLE WORLDWIDE EXTENSION**
(Prepared by the European Community)

1. THE CURRENT EU RAPID ALERT SYSTEM FOR FOOD AND FEED

Regulation (EC) No 178/2002 is the legal basis of the Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed (RASFF).

The system involves a network consisting of the Member States, the European Food Safety Authority and the Commission, which is responsible for the management of the system.

The rapid alert system for food and feed (RASFF) is primarily a tool for exchange of information between competent authorities in cases where a risk to human health arising from a food or feed has been identified and measures have been taken, such as withholding, recalling, seizure or rejection of the products concerned. This quick exchange of information allows all Member States to verify immediately whether they are also affected by the problem. Whenever the product is already on the market and should not be consumed, the Member States authorities are then in a position to take all urgent measures, including direct information to the public if necessary.

Third countries can enter the system on the basis of bilateral agreements. Conditions for such bilateral agreements are reciprocity and confidentiality requirements at least equivalent to the EU provisions. No such bilateral agreement has been concluded to date.

Nevertheless, in the meantime, the RASFF informs the authorities of a third country in the following circumstances:

- when it is known that a food or feed subject to a notification has been exported to this third country, so that it may take appropriate measures to protect its consumers;
- when a product originating from this third country has been subject to a notification, so as to allow its authorities to take appropriate corrective measures.

Since May 2003, the Commission publishes weekly on the web site of the Directorate General for Health and Consumer Protection a report containing information on all notifications. In doing so, it has been necessary to strike a balance between openness and protection of commercially sensitive information. Therefore information on the type of product and the problem identified, the origin of the product and the notifying Member State is published. Trade names and the identity of individual companies are not published. The aim is to avoid that the publication of too much information becomes counter productive and that information is withheld from the system by fears of negative publicity.

However, provision of further information to the public can be decided case by case where justified, such as the need to recall or withdraw a product, or to avoid consumption of an already purchased product.

The rapid alert system is a concrete and visible result of European integration. The quick exchange of information about food and feed related risks to human health ensures coherent and simultaneous actions by all Member States. This is a major contribution to consumer safety.

2. THE FUTURE

The globalisation of trade means that food and feed presenting a risk to human health may have a very wide distribution. In order to ensure that all measures required to protect consumer health are taken without delay in a coordinated manner, an international network for rapid exchange of information is essential. The project of a Worldwide RASFF is included in the Commission's financial perspectives for 2006-2013.

A worldwide system could be set up providing a framework for the exchange of information between countries or regional economic integration organisations.

For the system to function, a centralised list of contact points should be available to all members of the system. There should be only one contact point per country. A central point which manages the system should be designated. Preferably, this central point should be independent of a particular country or world region.

The central point should also draw up procedures defining the means of transmission, possible deadlines and the content of the messages.

The central point should maintain the list of contact points and update it every time it receives a change from a member country. It should also keep centralised (statistical) information to give feedback to all member countries

The world wide system should be phased in progressively

The possible initial triggers for a notification could be:

1. a measure that has been taken on the basis of international standards, or in absence thereof, on regional or national standards, in order to protect human health;
2. a measure that has been taken regarding a new or emerging risk to human health, for which legal standards are not yet available.