

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

Food supply networks: integrity and assurance review

Note of meeting with Alan Richards

Location: Association of Public Analysts Conference, Liverpool

Date: 23 October 2013

Attendees:

Rebecca Kenner (RK) – Assistant Secretary - Review into the Integrity and Assurance of Food Supply Networks

Alan Richards (AR) - Head of Analytical Services - Public Analyst Scientific Services Ltd (part of the Eurofins Group)

Michael Walker (MW) – Subject Matter Expert - Review into the Integrity and Assurance of Food Supply Networks

1. Introduction

MW gave a short overview of the Review; Chris Elliott was commissioned to undertake a review of the food supply chain, not just red meat, by the SoS for Defra and Department of Health. Chris has asked Michael to consider the food testing regime and lab capacity in England.

2. How did Official Control Laboratories cope during the horsemeat incident?

AR felt that one of the biggest issues during the horsemeat incident was the alienation of enforcement laboratories by the Food Standards Agency at an early stage. This began with the guidance that was provided by the Agency on methods of testing, which they said had been developed with Defra and LGC. This guidance made an assumption that all laboratories would take a “low-tech” approach, using equipment that was 10 years old. Some laboratories had much more advanced equipment and techniques, but these were not considered in the guidance.

When criticised by PAs, there was not a coherent approach to revising the guidance, with four or five versions being circulated successively. As a result there was a delay of many weeks for official guidance, which still did not overcome the concerns that had been raised.

The samples from AR’s lab were analysed at the Eurofins Centre of Excellence in Germany. Eurofins were able to increase their processing and testing very quickly, re-allocating staff to the task, so their throughput went from 25 official tests per day to over 100 tests per day. Public Analysts were instructed by the FSA that testing for horse and / or pig DNA in samples should be the top priority over any routine enforcement work. However, AR indicated that as his samples were subcontracted he was able to

commission DNA tests looking for seven species, including horse. This did not affect the routine work significantly. Where confirmation of the identity of meat samples was needed DNA sequencing was used. This technique is not available in any PA laboratory.

In order to ensure quality and consistency of testing and results, AR undertook his own two day audit of the Eurofins lab, which he felt was responding very well to the increased levels of testing. Their background in forensic testing meant they had an established understanding of traceability and the “chain of custody”.

3. How is the Official Control Laboratory system coping more generally?

AR’s personal view was that in its current state, the UK OCL system is not satisfactory, due to a range of long-standing issues. As it stands, there is insufficient spare capacity necessary to deal with an emergency. Local Authority labs are run with a bare minimum level of resources in order to undertake duties, but do not have spare capacity in the event of a crisis. The OCL testing regime only coped during the horsemeat incident because they (AR’s laboratory and others), were able to rely on a commercially run Centre of Excellence in Germany. However, that ability to rely on an external provider would have been compromised had there been a similar level of testing required by another country at the same time.

Public Analysts are also an ageing profession, which will create its own problems once the current tranche of analysts retire. There is a shortage of younger people being trained and qualified as Public Analysts as they do not see it as a career with a future. Some Local Authorities took no food samples at all last year and other Authorities are using the FSA grant for food testing to replace their own budgets, which puts PAs in a difficult position as they have a duty to tell the FSA they are doing this.

The UK does not undertake any of its own ‘blue sky thinking’ when it comes to testing, instead it follows the problems found by other countries. FSA should devote more resources to sampling foodstuffs that haven’t been tested before. AR undertook an exercise of cross-reference the alerts on the RASFF database against the testing undertaken on the FSA’s UK Food Surveillance System, to compare where the major testing issues were. This was principally for an exercise in Northern Ireland, but has been circulated more widely to other Local Authorities as they found it useful.

It is impossible to provide evidence of a detrimental effect on consumer protection of decline in chemical food surveillance because the insidious effects of chemical toxins do not manifest acutely.

Action: AR will send this paper to MW and RK.

4. How could the OCL system be improved?

AR had undertaken some research and found that it is the FSAs responsibility to ensure that there is sufficient laboratory capacity to fulfil their requirements.

AR feels that there needs to be a national co-ordinated system for food enforcement testing, The OCL system in England is made up of public and private laboratories that do not routinely collaborate as they are in competition with each other for contracts issued by some local authorities., AR believed that publicly-owned laboratories are no longer a

priority for most Local Authorities, so have a limited shelf-life. Budget reductions in local government will also result in less political and financial support for investment in their laboratory services.

A system like Public Health England may be appropriate, which is nationally co-ordinated, with a national strategy but also has individual competence centres and flexibility for regional requirements. The split between food microbiology and food chemistry seems arbitrary at times – if OCL system was to merge with another, the PHE lab system would have the most obvious fit.

25 November 2013