Scientific Committee on Emerging and Newly Identified Health Risks (SCENIHR)

Scientific Committee on Health and Environmental Risks (SCHER)

Request for a scientific opinion on

Environmental impact and effect on antimicrobial resistance of four substances used for the removal of microbial surface contamination of poultry carcasses

1. Background

In a report prepared by the Scientific Committee on Veterinary Measures relating to Public Health (SCVPH) issued on 30 October 1998[1], it was stated that antimicrobial substances should only be permitted for use if a fully integrated control programme is applied throughout the entire food chain. The SCVPH opinion issued on 14-15 April 2003 on the evaluation of antimicrobial treatments for poultry carcasses[2] concluded that decontamination can constitute a useful tool in further reducing the number of pathogens. Both documents stressed that antimicrobial substances shall be assessed thoroughly before their use is authorised.

With the adoption of the hygiene package in 2004 and the introduction of the HACCP principles in the entire food chain, establishments will be obliged to improve their hygiene and processing procedures. In addition, Regulation (EC) No 2160/2003[3] will force Member States to initiate implementing salmonella control programmes for poultry and pigs at farm level. Under such conditions the use of substances for the removal of microbial surface contamination from food of animal origin could be considered.

Article 3(2) of Regulation (EC) No 853/2004 of the European Parliament and of the Council laying down specific hygiene rules for food of animal origin, provides a legal basis to permit "the use of a substance other than potable water" to remove surface contamination from products of animal origin.

In light of the preparation of implementing measures resulting from Regulation (EC) No 853/2004, permission for use should be preceded by a thorough scientific evaluation of all risks involved. A number of scientific evaluations have taken place on the general aspects of antimicrobial treatment of food of animal origin and on the safety and toxicological aspects of four specific substances that are considered for approval.

A draft implementing measure has been proposed to allow the use of four specified substances (chlorine dioxide, trisodium phosphate, acidified sodium chlorite and peroxyacids) for the removal of surface contamination of poultry carcasses. The draft Commission Regulation will lay down detailed specifications for the use of the four substances including conditions of use.

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[1] Report by SCVPH on "Benefits and limitations of antimicrobial treatments for poultry carcasses" (1998).

[2] Opinion of the SCVPH on the "Evaluation of antimicrobial treatments for poultry carcasses" (2003).

[3] OJ L 325, 12.12.2003, p. 1.

Recently the Commission has prepared a request to SCENIHR for an overall assessment of the antibiotic resistance effects of biocides. Furthermore, EFSA has initiated a self-tasking project on antimicrobial resistance.

In the light of these initiatives it is necessary to perform an assessment of the impact on the environment of the four substances mentioned above. Moreover, it is necessary to investigate if it is possible that the use of the four substances could lead to antimicrobial resistance in the micro-organisms.

2. Terms of reference

SCENIHR is requested

To assess the possible effect on the emergence of antimicrobial resistance in case chlorine dioxide, acidified sodium chloride, trisodium phosphate and peroxyacids were applied according to the proposed conditions of use as a substance to remove microbial surface contamination from poultry carcasses.

To collaborate with EFSA, EMEA and the CRL on antimicrobial resistance[4], which have each expertise on a specific part of this subject.

SCHER is requested

To assess the possible environmental impact of chlorine dioxide, acidified sodium chloride, trisodium phosphate and peroxyacids when used according to the proposed conditions of use as a substance to remove microbial surface contamination from poultry carcasses.

3. Deadlines

31 March 2008. In light of the legislative proposal an earlier delivery of the opinion or partial response to the questions posed would be highly appreciated. In particular, any difficulties encountered in the assessment such as lack of suitable scientific data should be rapidly communicated to the Commission.

[4] EFSA = European Food Safety Authority in Parma, Italy; EMEA = European Medicines Agency in London, UK; CRL = Community Reference Laboratory in Copenhagen, Denmark.