Minutes of the Food Fraud Network webinar of the 21st November 2016

Attendees

EC Services:
SANTE G5, SANTE G3, SANTE A4

Member States:
DE, LT, HR, HU, MT, NL, NO, ES, SI, CZ, EE, BE, PL, FI, IT, LV, SE, AT, UK, IE, FR, SK, LU

The meeting started at 15.00.

After welcoming the new members of the FFN, the chair listed the agenda and asked if any other point had to be raised under AOB. Norway and Italy stressed that it is time to think of a strategic development in the fight against food fraud and the functioning of the food fraud network.

Under point 1 of the agenda (EU Coordinated Cases) DG SANTE provided an update on the development of some recent cases, namely: Rhodamine B; Shrimps from Vietnam and Hazelnuts from Georgia. The discussion then focused on the case of nitrates in Tuna. United Kingdom, Spain and France informed that local investigations are ongoing. Spain also highlighted that the case of nitrates in Tuna presents a risk for public health, which underlines a competence from the Spanish Food Safety Agency that exchanges through RASFF. The Commission upheld the view for which every time there is a risk for public health, RASFF is the IT tool to be used.

DG SANTE asked feedback on EU Coordinated Cases to check the favourable opinion of Member States. No objections were raised and Germany underlined that in general, coordination by the Commission is to be supported because many issues are not visible due to bilateral exchanges. Italy commented that in addition to the general information, it would be appropriate for the Commission and all MS to have clearer indications of what kind of actions (investigation, inspection of monitoring sampling, etc) should be taken; maybe this is missing because we need to define clear procedures.

Portugal asks a clarification on how a notification is listed as "suspicion of fraud" in RASFF. DG SANTE explained that first and foremost, is up to Member States to classify this information. However the Commission's services perform a constant screening of RASFF Notifications also to spot fraudulent activities.

DG SANTE then presented some procedural issues within the AAC: closure of cases according to the AAC Implementing act 2015/1918; how to choose the right system
where there is a doubt on the suspicion of fraud; access to the AAC AA and RASFF, which has to be requested directly by Member States; and lastly concerning the need for input from Member States on issues to be dealt with in Standard Operative Procedures. The Commission also reminded that physical and virtual training for all applications are possible.

Member States generally reacted positively on the AAC; however some issues have been highlighted such as: absence of percentages characters, general complexity of requests/responses and the issue of reminders and deadlines for answering. DG SANTE clarified that all the mentioned issues are well known and business analysis is currently ongoing to find the best suitable solution, compatibly with the final goal of making AAC and RASFF converge.

Norway presented a concrete case which, besides being a food fraud case, has been put in the AAC AA system. DG SANTE explained that certain cases need to be seen by a wider network than only the Food Fraud Network. Therefore, the AAC AA system is preferable, as all networks have access to it.

Italy stressed that, considering the increased number of members of the Food Fraud Network, some rules need to be in place in order to understand which national authority has to answer. The discussion is postponed to the next food fraud meeting in March 2017.

DG SANTE introduced a general reflection on the strategic approach to fight food fraud and step up the cooperation within the network. In order to propose solutions, DG SANTE proposed Member States to provide expertise and guidance in the form of five strategic papers on: prevention, sanctions, communications of results of inspections, cooperation with third countries and reporting back from industry. Member States asked for clarifications on what is expected from these papers and guidance concerning the structure. DG SANTE will elaborate guidelines on these papers to be circulated shortly after the meeting.

DG SANTE provided a quick debriefing on the coordinated control plan on honey. The objective of the control plan was to establish the prevalence on the European Union market of: (a) honey mislabelled with regard to its geographical and/or botanical origin and (b) products declared or presented as honey although containing exogenous sugars or sugar products. 2237 samples intended for human consumption were collected and analysed by Member States. Most non-compliances were related to the declaration of botanical source (7%) and adulteration with sugar (6%) and non-compliances related to geographical origin (2%). These results were published in December 2015 on the SANTE website. In a second step, due to the limitations of the currently validated methods of analysis, DG JRC was asked to conduct further tests with advanced methods to detect honey adulteration with exogenous sugars. More than 1000 samples were analysed by JRC with the EA/LC-IRMS methodology. The tests are now completed and the final report which, after having been shared with Member States, will be published on the SANTE website, is expected soon. The method used, EA/LC-IRMS, is considered as the most powerful method available as it can detect sugars from C3 and C4 plants. However it has not been validated in multi-laboratory studies conducted at international level. It relies on empirically determined benchmark purity criteria, taken from the published literature so that the selection of honeys used to set the benchmark may influence the compliance decision. Also the origin of the honey samples analysed has been taken from the labels which, in most cases, were not verified by analytical methods. This has to be taken into account when interpreting the results.
Ireland mentioned the possibility to have a joint meeting within operation OPSON VI (Europol/Interpol) and the Food Fraud Network in Ireland in October 2017. However the dates need to be fixed according to EUROPOL’s agenda. The possibility of funding attendees both from DG SANTE and from EUROPOL has to be explored in order to have a wider audience to discuss the issues related to food fraud and possible ways of enhancing cooperation.

Ireland also briefly mentioned the Authent-NET project which tries to establish a network of funding organisations, maximizing budgets by leveraging more strategic approach to programmes and ultimately achieve better results.

The meeting ended at 17.00 as envisaged.