

Food Standards Agency Keynote Address

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FSA Role

Our job at the Food Standards Agency is to make sure food is safe, it is our number one priority. As the UK Government's food regulator we are here to protect consumers' interests in relation to the whole food chain – or from “farm to fork”.

In addition to monitoring and enforcement our remit also includes providing advice and information to consumers and the rest of Government on all aspects of food safety. In Scotland and Northern Ireland we also have responsibility for healthy eating and nutrition policy.

The FSA was set up in the UK in 2000 in the wake of the BSE crisis. It was felt that food safety in the UK had suffered from a lack of transparency and a more independent voice was needed to regulate the UK's food industry. An independent agency would ensure that consumers are never kept in the dark about issues which could affect the safety of their food.

So how does the FSA fulfil its role as an independent regulator? Firstly the FSA is a non-Ministerial Government department. This means that, although we are accountable to the UK parliament, we do not report to Government ministers. Instead the executive reports to an independent board, currently chaired by Jeff Rooker. We have a commitment to openness and transparency so all of our policy discussions and decisions are made in public at our open board meetings.

Being open also means we use plain language and communicate to consumers in a timely way. We will always explain the reasons for our decisions and advice, and publish our achievements against the targets that have been set for us.

The FSA's duties have recently been refocused on food safety, having previously also encompassed food labelling and nutrition.

Enforcement Role

The food safety remit includes ensuring effective enforcement and monitoring of all UK food businesses.

In the meat industry this means inspecting all fresh meat premises to ensure the industry is not only safeguarding public health, but also the health and welfare of the animals at slaughter.

For the rest of the food industry, the FSA works closely with enforcement officers from local authorities around the UK monitoring food businesses to make sure food law is being applied and consumers are being protected at all stages of the food chain.

Food Incidents

A big part of the Agency's remit is dealing with food incidents. The FSA deals with around 1,500 incidents every year. These are defined as any event where there is an actual or suspected threat to the safety or quality of food, and where intervention may be needed to protect consumers.

Food incidents can range from unauthorised dyes found in food ingredients to counterfeit vodka found on sale in the shops. Most commonly though incidents involve microbiological or chemical contamination of food or animal feed, and can require food products to be withdrawn from sale or recalled from consumers.

In the UK, food businesses are legally obliged to report any food incident to the FSA. Once alerted to the problem our incidents team will work with the business and local authority enforcement officers to assess the risk and trace the affected products. In dealing with these food incidents you really get a sense of the global scale of the food chain.

For example, last year's *E coli* outbreak in Germany, which killed 50 people, was eventually traced back to a batch of fenugreek seeds that came from Egypt and were distributed throughout Europe.

There are inherent challenges in managing food incidents. By the time a problem is identified food products can be distributed across the UK and sometimes throughout the world. The FSA has an important role to play in managing risk across a food chain which is incredibly complex.

Strong relations with the food industry are obviously essential for all of the FSA's work. Whether it involves managing the type of incidents I have just mentioned or in its day-to-day work monitoring food businesses.

The vast majority of food businesses, whether they are manufacturers, processors or importers, share our concerns for food safety and take their responsibilities for protecting public health very seriously. It is important for us and for them that we maintain this effective working relationship.

Correct handling of incidents relies on accurate assessments of risk which in turn depends on sound science

Science and the FSA

Science is at the heart of everything we do at the FSA. We are an evidence-based organisation and our policies and consumer advice are developed according to the best available science. We believe this gives consumers confidence in the Agency's work, as it means the information and advice they get from us is free from commercial or political influence.

We have a strong team of scientists in the FSA, integrated into different policy areas. To help their work the Agency also has a network of independent scientific advisory committees in

the UK and works closely with bodies such as the European Food Safety Authority and the World Health Organization, providing the very best of scientific advice.

We also get the science right by spending 20 per cent of our budget, some £25m, on research. This makes the FSA the main spender on food safety research in the country. This means we are constantly adding to our knowledge of food safety.

We are using science for example to find solutions to one of our biggest food safety challenges – tackling the food bug campylobacter. Campylobacter is the most common cause of food poisoning in the UK; it is responsible for more than 370,000 cases per year resulting in more than 17,500 hospitalisations and around 90 deaths. Campylobacter accounts for a third of the cost of the burden of foodborne illness in England and Wales, estimated at more than £500m per year.

In the UK, campylobacter is found mainly in raw poultry and our own research shows that two thirds of shop-bought raw chicken is contaminated with it. Our campylobacter strategy is looking at all stages of the food chain to identify where the risk of cross-contamination can be minimised. This strategy includes a programme of research aimed at giving us more knowledge about how this bacteria works. Through this we hope to find out what scientific interventions could possibly be employed in the future to tackle campylobacter and reduce its prevalence in foods

So we will always strive to put science first, but this can sometimes present certain challenges.

For example, sometimes research can turn up results which are difficult to interpret and present. Last December we released research into the prevalence of norovirus in oysters. Historically we had seen outbreaks of norovirus, the winter vomiting bug, linked to eating raw oysters. As part of our work to help the shellfish industry reduce the risk from this virus we undertook a project to measure its prevalence in UK oysters.

The research found 76% of oysters sampled from UK beds contained norovirus. Although scientists are unable to determine how much of the norovirus was infectious and likely to make you ill, the publication of the report was, understandably, a concern to the shellfish industry. Our commitment to science can challenge us as we try to present our research in a manner which balances the needs of consumers with the concerns of industry.

The FSA is a regulator that has a commitment to putting the consumer first, to openness and transparency, and putting the best science at the heart of everything we do. We are also committed to maintaining a strong relationship with all elements of the food industry so we can continue to help keep food safe.