Making food safety the winner at the World Cup

A safe food supply is a critical element to hosting a successful Rugby World Cup 2011.

Food safety and rugby has come under the spotlight before when the then coach of the All Blacks claimed food poisoning in the lead up to the 1995 World Cup final had ruined the team’s chances of winning.

Food poisoning also made the news after a 2006 All Blacks test against Ireland at Eden Park, when 376 corporate guests fell ill with norovirus – in what is believed to be our biggest ever single outbreak of foodborne illness – after being served raw, thawed Korean oysters contrary to cooking instructions.

MAF’s food safety experts are as keen as anyone to see the All Blacks prevail on 29 October, but professionally their overriding interest is in making sure everyone enjoys the event without getting sick from the food they eat.

The tournament has become the highest grossing event in New Zealand history even before the whistle is blown for the first game, so it will be a significant boost for our economy.

It will also be an amazing opportunity to show off our beautiful country to the world, which will hopefully attract more tourists.

However, because of the high profile nature of this event, there’s the risk that if anything goes wrong it could damage our reputation.

For food businesses it’s important to bear in mind that thanks to the estimated 2500 international media that will be covering the event, any incidents of foodborne illness have the potential to be beamed around the world and put a dent in our image.

This is one of the reasons that MAF has been working closely with Rugby NZ 2011 and with the hospitality industry to ensure that everyone can eat, drink and be merry without any worries.

We’ve been engaged in sorting out the standards that Rugby New Zealand will require of...
team hotels and the match venues, as well as verifying that the VIP and team hotels have the necessary food safety requirements in place to responsibly host the teams and their support staff. We have also had input into the requirements for marae and liaised with councils about fan-zone food safety.

Focus is now turning toward the “what if” scenarios and contingencies to ensure we are geared up to deal with those. Ensuring MAF response and crisis management systems are honed for the rugby world cup is an important part of that work.

There were 141 foodborne illness outbreaks in New Zealand last year according to an ESR report, which means we can expect about 16 during the six-week period of the tournament. MAF works in partnership with health authorities to respond to such events, and we are going to examine our combined preparedness and linkages during planned exercises leading up to the Cup.

Planning by businesses to manage “what if” scenarios and risks around those should be well advanced by now.

Ensuring that the Rugby World Cup 2011 becomes a success requires a team effort. Make sure that your business plays its part.

Adopt a sound food control system such as the template found here: www.foodsafety.govt.nz/policy-law/food-bill/domestic-food-review/fcp/

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MAF toxicologist appointed to international committee

The expertise of Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF) Principal Adviser (Toxicology), John Reeve, has been recognised with his appointment to an international scientific review committee.

John’s selection as one of the scientific experts on the Joint FAO/WHO Expert Committee on Food Additives (JECFA) – which evaluates the safety of food additives, natural toxins, contaminants, and veterinary drug residues – will have substantial benefits to MAF and New Zealand.

“Through John’s involvement at JECFA we will have access to the most up-to-date and scientifically relevant thinking in the area of modern toxicology and we can be sure he will have a valuable influence in the discussions of this committee,” MAF Deputy Director-General Standards Carol Barnao says.

“It will also give us early notification of any changes which may be relevant to New Zealand as a result of JECFA’s work.”

JECFA conducts the risk assessments for the Codex Alimentarius Commission, which sets the maximum levels for chemicals in food in international trade. The Codex standards are also used by the World Trade Organization in cases of dispute between trading partners.

Committee members are appointed for a five-year term. The criteria the WHO use to select JECFA members includes that the candidates must be recognised as having demonstrated expertise in the various aspects of toxicology and risk analysis, and be recognised by their scientific peers for that expertise.

JECFA’s work programme on contaminants will look at issues such as mercury, cadmium, lead, acrylamide and pyrrolizidine alkaloids.

Progress on the Food Bill

The Food Bill provides a much needed modernisation of New Zealand’s food safety legislation. It provides the framework for an efficient, effective and risk-based regulatory regime for managing the safety and suitability of food produced, processed, manufactured, traded, transported and imported to New Zealand.

Under the Food Bill, food businesses will be expected to be proactive, establishing safe procedures and systems ready for verification rather than the current system, which is based on “one size fits all” requirements and inspections.

“Although the Food Bill is on the Order Paper awaiting the second reading in the House, it is likely that this will not now happen before the general election. Factors such as the Christchurch earthquakes have reduced the time available for the Governments’ legislative programme in what is already a short House sitting year,” says Julie Collins, MAF Director Biosecurity and Food Policy.

There is a strong commitment in the House to both the Food Bill and the food safety regime it proposes. Work will continue, including with territorial authorities and industry stakeholders, to ensure that everything is in place for a smooth implementation process.
Best before, or Use by?

For consumers that might be confused by labelling referring to either “Best before” or “Use by”, MAF Manager (Labelling), Margaret Brooker, says the concept is quite simple.

Best-before is an indication of how long food would remain at its best quality, while use-by is the date after which it should not be consumed because of health and safety reasons.

“It is not permitted to sell foods after the expiry of the use by date but you are allowed to sell foods after the expiry of the best before date.”

The issue gained prominence in the UK recently as it is thought that a great deal of food is thrown away unnecessarily because consumers do not understand the difference between use-by and best before. It was suggested that best before dates be discontinued. However that would require an EU law change to do so.

It is particularly important that vulnerable groups such as pregnant women and the elderly do not consume food after its expiry date.

“If in doubt don’t consume it. Trust your instincts,” Ms Brooker said.

Survey of antimicrobial resistant foodborne bacteria produces pleasing results

A new Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF) survey has shown no human health implications from antimicrobial resistance in New Zealand food-producing animals and fresh produce.

Antimicrobial resistant (AMR) bacteria – which do not respond to one or more specific antibiotics – are increasingly associated with human illness and death. While the large majority of cases are due to antimicrobial use in human medicine, there is also a potential for transmission via the food chain.

The year-long baseline survey carried out in 2009-2010 focused on antimicrobial resistance to important and commonly used antibiotics among E. Coli, Enterococcus, Campylobacter and Salmonella bacteria found in freshly dressed carcasses of calves, pigs and broiler poultry from New Zealand abattoirs and processing plants. It also included samples of Salmonella and E. Coli isolated during a survey of fresh produce in 2008-2009.

MAF Principal Adviser (Public Health), Donald Campbell says the survey indicates that our farming community is using antibiotics responsibly in compliance with veterinarian advice.

“Although the survey detected some resistance to certain antimicrobials from particular bacteria found in the targeted foods, it is pleasing to see that the resistance has no direct implications for human health,” he says.

Dr Campbell says that comparing results from this survey with the limited data available from earlier New Zealand studies on bacteria isolated from animals suggests there has been no increase in resistance in food-producing animals in New Zealand.

Compared with 2009 data from the Danish DANMAP surveillance system, which uses a similar methodology to that used in this survey, resistance among bacteria from New Zealand pigs and poultry was either lower or not significantly different.

“Denmark is seen as a world leader in controlling antimicrobial resistance so that’s a good benchmark to measure ourselves against,” Dr Campbell says.

MAF’s baseline survey was carried out to determine the current status and whether there is a need in New Zealand to implement an ongoing surveillance programme for antibiotic resistance in food-producing animals.

As part of the management of antibiotic resistance, registrants of restricted veterinary medicines containing antibiotics must provide an annual report of sales by month to MAF. Along with the antimicrobial resistance survey, MAF released an overview of antibiotic sales and use from 2004-2009. This report shows that total antibiotic sales decreased from a peak of 62,883 kg in 2005/6 to 53,031 kg in 2007/8. Sales increased by 5 percent between 2007/8 and 2008/9.

A report containing a review and update on New Zealand’s regulatory control of antimicrobial agricultural compounds with regard to antimicrobial resistance has also been released.
Limiting Listeria
– MAF presents to industry

In June, MAF presented “Guidance for the control Listeria monocytogenes in ready-to-eat foods” to the industry, through a seminar in Rotorua and workshops in Auckland and Christchurch. We were pleased to see so many producers of ready-to-eat foods, along with auditors, advisers and consultants.

The workshops are part of MAF’s Listeria Risk Management Strategy which focuses on minimising Listeria contamination, especially in ready-to-eat foods provided to the consumer.

Listeria monocytogenes causes listeriosis. Like other bacteria causing foodborne illness, Listeria can affect anyone but has an amore severe impact on the very young, old and frail, pregnant women and immuno-compromised people. While there are a small number of Listeria cases each year, it can have a truly devastating consequence on a person’s health and can be fatal.

Like other bacteria Listeria can live and be transferred on to food during the growing and production stages of ready-to-eat foods. A unique characteristic is that once it has contaminated food Listeria will just keep on living, growing and thriving even at refrigerated temperatures down to 0°C.

It is hoped that the guidance and workshops held will help businesses to understand how to manage the risk from Listeria contamination through Good Operating Practices, Monitoring and Corrective Actions.

MAF takes responsibility to provide industry with the tools it needs to ensure food safety, in this case tools for the ready-to-eat food industry. Developing guidance and ensuring it is understood is one way MAF can assist industry to reduce risk to their customers.

Foodborne illness trending down

A campaign to reduce spread of three illnesses through food appears to be making progress.

MAF is working with industry on goals of reducing food-borne campylobacteriosis and salmonellosis, and ensuring there are no increases in food-borne listeriosis.

The Institute of Environmental Science and Research produces a report for MAF each year on the levels of illness caused by food-borne diseases.

This year’s report, which has just been released, shows the level of foodborne campylobacteriosis in particular is appreciably down. Campylobacter is a bacterial organism that causes the gastrointestinal disease campylobacteriosis when it lodges in the walls of a person’s intestine – with dire consequences.

When this campaign started, New Zealand had the highest rate of reported Campylobacter infection in the world.

The trend is encouraging, and it looks like MAF could soon achieve its five-year goal of halving the 2008 levels of foodborne Campylobacteriosis.

The latest Foodborne disease in New Zealand report estimates there were 3957 cases of foodborne Campylobacteriosis in 2010. This compares to an estimated 8652 foodborne cases in 2006, when the work started.

Key to making progress on this is the Campylobacter Risk Management Strategy which is guiding MAF’s work with industry, scientists and other experts, food processors and retailers to reduce Campylobacter levels, particularly in poultry meat.

In line with the approach being taken internationally, MAF is working to put in place interventions at all steps along the farm-to-fork food chain.

As part of this, the Strategy aims to produce the greatest reduction in bacteria numbers as early as possible in the food chain (that is, as close to the farm as is practical and effective).

The Strategy is also pragmatic and recognises that, because Campylobacter is a natural part of the gut bacteria of poultry, this hazard is very unlikely to be reduced to zero.

For this reason, it will always be important to provide consumer information about the need to carefully handle poultry, just as it is with all foods.

This year’s report also shows a declining rate of foodborne salmonellosis. In 2010, there were an estimated 557 cases of foodborne salmonellosis, compared with the estimated 658 cases in 2006.

The third key area interest is the rate of food-borne listeriosis. This has remained at a level of around 4.5 per 100 000 of population since 2007, which is in line with the goals. There were an estimated 18 cases of foodborne listeriosis in 2010.

Overall, this year’s report shows a significant decline in gastroenteritis, a reporting category for a range of potentially food-borne pathogens, with 492 cases reported in 2010 – compared with 937 in 2006.

These results are all promising, but we cannot afford to ease off on our endeavours to minimise illness associated with food.

A recent economic costing showed the burden on the country is still unacceptably high, at an estimated $162 million for the six major food-borne illnesses in 2009.
MAF Food Safety wins Halal journal award

MAF won the award for best service provider at the World Halal Forum in Malaysia in April.

Dr. Tony Zohrab on behalf the MAF received this award from the former Prime Minister of Malaysia, YAB Tun Abdullah Haji Ahmed Badawi at the official gala dinner in April.

New Zealand is a leading country in the Halal Industry as well as the first non Muslim country to receive this prestigious award. The Award means that New Zealand is recognised globally as having the best Halal System after MAF implemented the Animal Products (Overseas Market Access Requirements for Halal Assurances) Notice.

In Arabic, the word halal means permitted or legal. The concept ensures that animals are treated respect and are well cared for.

Japan update

Since the Japanese earthquake in March, MAF has been closely monitoring food imports to ensure that food coming into New Zealand is safe.

Imports from Japan are limited to a small range of specialty products (such as small volumes of seaweed and sake as well as other Japanese specialty food products such as mirin, soy sauce, dried noodles, pickled ginger, wasabi).

As a precautionary measure MAF is working with importers of food from Japan to ensure that products are assessed.

The National Radiation Laboratory is performing targeted testing to examine foods from affected prefectures in Japan for radioactivity, ensuring radionuclide levels are under international safe levels.

As at 1 August, 20 products from selected Japanese prefectures have been tested. These have been deemed safe for consumption and cleared for sale.

The results found to date are no cause for concern. All food products tested were found to be well below actionable levels for radiation. The radioactivity levels found are indistinguishable from the naturally occurring background levels we would expect to find in food.

The levels reported are below the limit of detection and are not able to be broken down to levels from the food or machinery. Typically background radioactivity levels are below 2 Bq/kg.

Japan is continuing to impose controls on the sale and export of potentially contaminated products from affected prefectures. MAF will continue testing, collecting and assessing information from Japanese officials and international authorities. New Zealand is a member of the International Food Safety Authorities Network (INFOSAN) a joint initiative between the World Health Organization and the Food and Agriculture Organization. As such MAF receives daily updates on the situation. We also receive daily reports from the United Nations Internal Atomic Energy Agency. Any new information received is examined and discussed with importers to ensure that the response here is appropriate.

For the list of tested foods, please go to: www.foodsafety.govt.nz/elibrary/industry/japanese-earthquake/test-result-japanese-food-imports.htm