Disaster Narrowly Averted for Organic Produce

NHF at the Codex Alimentarius Meeting on Food Hygiene – Los Angeles 2016

Written By Birgitta Lauren
Category:Codex
Published: Jan-09-2017

Having studied Codex Alimentarius for many years, and wishing to be able to be a fly on the wall, I was able to actually participate as an NHF delegate helping shape food health globally, which was humbling and also gave me an honored feeling of heavy responsibility to potentially affect world health.

The Codex Committee on Food Hygiene (CCFH) is hosted by the United States government, and its most recent annual meeting was held during the week of November 6-11, 2016, in Los Angeles, California. It was a momentous week.

The U.S. delegation invited me to their pre-meeting meet for introductions. It consisted of representatives from the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and various special interests. Upon walking into that meeting, I felt a certain level of instant disdain from the FDA.

The Meeting Starts with a Propaganda Speech

Dr. Christine Bruhn – a Consumer Education Specialist at the University of California, Davis – was the keynote speaker and spoke about Food Hygiene and Irradiation. It was more or less a propaganda speech for increasing the use of irradiation that she claimed was safe for anything. Since irradiation can have carcinogenic effects, and may kill bacteria but doesn't remove the culprit (such as feces), I asked her about it after her speech. She quickly dismissed my claims, did admit that irradiation reduces nutrient content of foods, which she considered "unimportant," and walked away. Jamaica mentioned they use a combination of lime juice and vinegar to combat bacteria and did not see the point in using such fancy and expensive antibacterial methods. Several African countries agreed.

The first day of the meeting, Monday, produced further discussions on whether raw meat should be washed or not. The World Health Organization (WHO) wants to use its World Antibiotic Awareness program to compile a Genome Sequence on bacteria to help the Developing World; but the WHO realizes there is risk with assessment methodologies, ranking, low resources environmentally, and that many members are needed to help.

There was a lengthy discussion on how to implement additional Good Hygiene Practices (GHP) safety rules and procedures to complement Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point System (HACCP) for further hygiene controls. There was no mention of where all of these physical contaminations may

originate from such as possible sabotage, chemtrails altering soil content, or just bad hygiene practices. Sara Mortimer from Land-o-Lakes described how they handle the situation, to which several developing countries scoffed that such practice would not be possible in their countries. Controls need to be flexible for the location where just GHP may be sufficient or the only practical method and the foundation for HACCP. GHP could also be prerequisite program before HACCP is implemented.

Chemicals Sanctioned for Organic Produce?

When it came to revising the Code of Hygienic Practice for Fresh Fruits and Vegetables, it became clear that, as proposed, this Codex Code would completely eliminate organic produce from the market. As written, the Code stated that ***only*** chemical biocides (substances such as a pesticide that can kill living organisms) could be used post-harvest to clean all produce, including organic produce. This requirement would result in organic produce being contaminated with non-organic cleansing residues. NHF could not allow this to happen.

NHF managed to change the wording that "only" chemical biocides could be used post-harvest, to wording that "chemical or other natural biocides methods can be used postharvest," thereby saving all organic farms from being forced to use synthetic chemicals only. A hidden disaster was thus narrowly averted and had NHF not been present, the "chemicals only" requirement would have become cemented in place.

Histamine in Fish

Then, it got fishy – literally. A new joint FAO/WHO program and report to regulate and educate fisheries to consumers in regards to Histamines in fish is underway to reduce possible Scombrotoxin fish poisoning from fish high in Histamines (i.e., fish that have gone bad). Histamines naturally occur in fish derived from the decarboxylation of the amino acid Histidine during spoilage or fermentation. Spoiled fish usually also contain cadaverine and putrescine whose precursors are lysine and ornithine.

The proposed limit for Histidine fish is 20 milligrams per 100 grams, even though that level still causes health issues in some people. Certain countries would prefer limits set at half that, or 10 mg/100 g. In fact, a strong disagreement arose between the USA/EU/FAO/CODEX/Norway/Netherland camp and the NHF/Morocco/Uganda/Senegal/Benin camp on this issue with the result that no agreement could be reached. Instead, the Chairman decided to create an Electronic Working Group (eWG) to discuss the issues raised at this meeting and then to present some sort of solution four months prior to the next meeting so that CCFH could discuss it then.

The Committee agreed to include a table with a simplified title as illustrative of the species associated with histamine formation. However, the US/Norway camp adamantly wanted this table to exclude the common fish names (using the scientific fish names only), the amount of Histidine in each fish, as well as salmon altogether, as they asserted that the Food and Agriculture Organization had not found a single study in 20 years showing any significant Histidine content in salmon.

This brings up several problems: (1) There hasn't been any "known" study, so this qualifier sounded suspicious; (2) For a better educated public, if salmon doesn't contain Histidines, then it would benefit both consumers and fisheries to know this, as well as have all fish species' respective common and

scientific names and the amount of Histidine in each different species; and (3) 25 years ago we didn't have Norwegian "farmed" Salmon… and therein lays the "fishy" part.

However, there ***are*** studies, and the NHF will work with some of the developing countries that fear these new possible fish regulations could severely hurt their countries' trade economically as well as their people's health. NHF's position is to keep all scientific and common names in the report as well, as all other technical information in regards to the levels of Histidine in each fish species and keep salmon in the report. FAO thinks a complete table of all fishes could "confuse" people, and unless a study is forthcoming by the next eWG meeting in 2017, salmon will be excluded.

By the way, the fish species in fish-poisoning case reports that was the highest in Histamine was Tuna, especially Spanish tuna, as well as Australian, American, and Thai tuna. But here is a tip: Don't eat fish that has gone bad.

NHF attended the conclusion meeting on Friday, where the Final Report is presented and discussed, to ensure that all of our comments and edits were included properly as presented during the plenary meeting. Of course they were not; but as the NHF representative, and continuing the NHF tradition of being assertive, I made sure that the final document was corrected. Much to the dismay of the FDA and FAO.