

PRESS RELEASE

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Officials examine how to analyse risk for food safety measures

How Central American countries have dealt with the risk of mad cow disease, Madagascar with African swine fever, Australia with Chinese pears, the US with salmonella in eggs — these and other topics were discussed in a two-day WTO workshop which ended today.

The over 150 participants included officials, based in the capitals of WTO member governments, whose duties include preparing and implementing measures to deal with food safety and animal and plant protection (sanitary and phytosanitary measures — SPS).

The workshop's focus was on how to analyse risks to health, in order to decide on necessary measures, as required by the WTO's Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (the "SPS Agreement"). It provided an opportunity for officials from around the world to share their experiences. The chairperson was Dr Alejandro Thiermann, a former chairperson of the WTO's SPS Committee.

"The objective of this workshop is to shed light on the complex relationship between risk analysis and the disciplines of the WTO Agreement on Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures", said Mr Frank Wolter, Director of the WTO Secretariat's Agriculture Division.

Inaugurating the two-day workshop, he underlined the fundamental right of all WTO Members to provide their consumers with safe imported food, and to protect their animals and plants from health risks associated with imports; this right took priority over trade.

However, he said, to ensure that this right is not misused for protectionist purposes, one of the basic obligations under the SPS Agreement is that measures to protect health should be based on scientific principles. They should not be maintained without sufficient scientific evidence, although the agreement also allows for the adoption of provisional measures in cases where relevant scientific evidence is insufficient. This is why health risk assessment and reference to internationally developed health standards are critical elements of the SPS Agreement, he said.

How to go about ensuring a scientific justification in practice is a major implementation issue for WTO Members, in particular for many developing countries, Mr Wolter observed.

A second idea behind the workshop was to bring capital-based developing country officials working in the areas of food safety, animal health or plant health to Geneva so as to enable them to also participate in the regular meeting of the SPS Committee scheduled for 21-22 June. The US Department of Agriculture provided funding which allowed the WTO to sponsor the participation of six experts from least-developed countries.

During the course of the workshop, participants discussed how the notion of science had been brought into the SPS Agreement during the negotiations, including the early contacts with the three relevant standard-setting organizations (FAO/WHO Codex Alimentarius Commission, Office Internationale des Epizooties (OIE) and FAO International Plant Protection Convention (IPPC)). Participants also heard presentations on the fundamentals of risk analysis, as well as details on the provisions of the SPS Agreement directly relating to scientific justification.

Throughout the workshop, experts from Member governments and from observers organizations presented case studies of *actual* risk assessments made by countries and how these had, in the real world, resulted in specific health-related measures aimed at ensuring food safety, or the protection of animal or plant health. The health issues discussed in the workshop are the kind of specific trade concerns which WTO Members have also been raising at the regular meetings of the SPS Committee.

A summary report of the workshop and presentations made by experts, will be put on the WTO's Internet website in July 2000.