

Chapter 12: FSA Food Safety Advice and Communication

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12.1 Scope

12.1.1 The Food Standards Agency is responsible for ensuring food safety in the event of a nuclear emergency, and does this through providing precautionary food safety advice and by implementing food restriction orders if necessary. This advice may cover different geographical areas and different time periods to other countermeasures. Experience from exercises has identified the need for NEPLG guidance on the basis for these differences and on how these measures can be communicated through the off-site facility. This chapter provides guidance on how this might be done.

12.2 Legal basis for food safety

12.2.1 In any future accident where radioactivity is released into the environment, the criteria for intervention in food safety (at least initially) will be the Council Food Intervention Levels (CFILs) laid down by the European Union. These set maximum permitted levels of radioactivity in foodstuffs and animal feedingstuffs.

12.2.2 The FSA will act to ensure that food that exceeds, or potentially exceeds, these levels does not enter the food chain and can impose statutory restriction orders, made under the Food and Environment Protection Act (FEPA) 1985. A FEPA order delineates a geographical area, using legally enforceable boundaries, and prohibits certain activities related to food gathering or production within that boundary. In addition, the FSA is also likely to issue advice to the public within an affected area.

12.3 Precautionary food safety advice

12.3.1 The FSA will aim to issue precautionary food safety advice to the public as soon as possible, probably within a few hours of notification, following declaration of a nuclear emergency. Cautious assumptions will be used in developing this advice as the primary purpose is to ensure quick protection of the public from immediate exposure. In the early stages, whilst there are uncertainties, the advice may cover a large area on the basis that this ensures public protection and that it is better to over-estimate an area, and subsequently reduce it, than to

under-estimate it and necessitate a later enlargement. The area covered by the advice will have to be easily described in the format of a press statement, and may be defined by postcodes, district / county boundaries or geographical features. The advice would also make clear what food products were unaffected and therefore what was safe to consume within the area.

12.4 Food safety assessment

12.4.1 Food safety advice will be drawn up on the following basis.

12.4.2 On notification, the FSA will carry out a rapid assessment of the emergency's potential impact on food safety, using whatever information is available. In the early stages of an accident this may consist of an estimate of source term from the site operators, or a few measurements of air-borne radioactivity close to the site.

12.4.3 If it is assessed that levels of radioactivity in any potential food products may exceed the CFILs as a result of the accident, the Agency will describe the area in which the relevant CFILs might be exceeded, name the food products affected and advise on actions (e.g. avoiding eating, collecting, harvesting or transporting foods). The products may include agricultural produce, domestic garden produce, fish, shellfish or any other food materials exposed to the release (on market stalls, for example).

12.4.4 Due to the process of radionuclide transfer in the environment, some products may not reach their peak radioactivity concentrations until a few days after a release. The FSA will aim to allow for this effect, so that initial advice covers any area where intervention levels would later be exceeded.

12.4.5 The FSA will support the initial assessment with a monitoring programme, where food and environmental samples will be collected from within and outside the affected area, and the results compared to CFILs. The results from the programme will be used to refine the restricted area as appropriate.

12.5 Differences between food safety and other countermeasure advice

12.5.1 The area over which food is affected is likely to be much larger than the areas where people have been asked to shelter in their homes or evacuate. Sheltering and evacuation are necessary to avoid people breathing in radioactivity or receiving direct radiation from the plume for the short time that it passes overhead. However, it is possible that some people may eat large quantities of contaminated foods from the affected areas (e.g. vegetables from allotments) over prolonged periods. It is therefore, necessary to limit radioactivity in food at a cautious level which, in turn, leads to a relatively large area being affected. This difference is observed in exercises where evacuation

or sheltering are usually simulated to a just a few km from the site, while food advice may reach out to tens of kms.

12.6 Communicating the differences between food safety advice and other countermeasures

12.6.1 The apparent inconsistency between food safety and other countermeasure advice needs to be treated with care and the difference explained to ensure a co-ordinated message is given to the public. The introduction of countermeasures such as evacuation or sheltering will usually precede food safety advice. It is suggested that this advice is accompanied with a statement that food safety advice, regarding crops and livestock, may follow and cover a wider area. This avoids the inference that people outside the sheltering/evacuation area are not subject to any effect of the emergency and raises awareness that food safety advice may follow. Advice can also be provided to those sheltering giving reassurance that unexposed food in the home is safe to consume.

12.7 Liaison between the FSA and other organisations

12.7.1 Due to its statutory role, the FSA holds principle responsibility for decisions on food safety and will always act to ensure protection of the public. The FSA will always inform other organisations of its intended actions and will consult them for views where possible and appropriate. This liaison is essential for a co-ordinated response and to ensure the information reaches the public in a co-ordinated, consistent and timely way.

12.7.2 Liaison between the FSA and other responding organisations will occur in a number of ways:

- between FSA and other staff at the off-site facility.
- between FSA HQ and the HQ of other organisations.
- between FSA HQ and the off-site facility, particularly the Government Office representative prior to the arrival of the FSA team at the off-site facility.
- between FSA and other staff at NEBR.

12.7.3 Consultation on food safety measures will take place between the FSA representative at the off-site facility and relevant co-located staff, such as GTA and Gold Commander. Prior to the arrival of FSA staff at the off-site facility, FSA will liaise with the Government Office for the Regions representative, who can act as a spokesperson for FSA.