

# Setting food standards



**NutriScene**  
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International regulatory agencies discuss various issues on food labelling requirements.



After lengthy deliberation, the Codex Committee on Food Labelling has decided to disallow the use of sodium nitrate in organic farming.

Most Codex standards take a number of years to develop. Once adopted by the CAC, a Codex standard is added to the Codex Alimentarius.

The following paragraphs summarise some of the topics discussed in the CCFL meeting this year in Ottawa. Several of these topics on the agenda are previous issues that continue to be discussed in the Committee. A couple of the topics are new items being discussed by CCFL.

## Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health

Recognising the heavy and growing burden of non-communicable diseases in almost all countries, the WHO has developed a Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health.

The Strategy addresses two of the main risk factors for non-communicable diseases, namely, diet and physical activity, while complementing the long-established and ongoing work carried out by WHO, and nationally, on other nutrition-related areas, including undernutrition, micronutrient deficiencies and infant- and young-child feeding.

The Strategy also identified that public health efforts may be strengthened by the use of international norms and standards, particularly those drawn up by the Codex Alimentarius Commission. Areas for further development could include:

- Labelling to allow consumers to be better informed about the benefits and content of foods
  - Measures to minimise the impact of marketing on unhealthy dietary patterns
  - More detailed information about healthy consumption patterns, including steps to increase the consumption of fruit and vegetables
  - Production and processing standards regarding the nutritional quality and safety of products
- Involvement of governments and non-governmental organizations as provided for in the Codex should be encouraged.

Based on these recommendations as well as responses from member countries of the

Codex, a Draft Action Plan on how Codex can assist in the implementation of the Global Strategy was prepared. This was tabled for discussion in this year's CCFL meeting.

Seven specific proposed actions were actively debated by countries for almost a whole day. Three topics had considerable support from countries and were identified to be further deliberated and activities drawn up. The three proposed actions had recommended that:

1. The current Codex Guidelines on Nutrition Labelling be amended to require mandatory nutrient declaration on the labels of all pre-packaged foods;
2. The list of nutrients that must always be declared be expanded to include sugars, saturated fatty acids, trans fatty-acids and sodium, in addition to the current four items of energy value, protein, carbohydrate and fat;
3. Additional criteria for nutrition labelling be developed to enhance legibility and readability so as to improve consumer use and understanding of nutrition information provided

In addition, CCFL will continue to work on the disclosure of quantities of beneficial ingredients (fruits, vegetables, whole grains, legumes and nuts) when representations are made about their presence in foods.

Consumers regard the consumption of these ingredients as "healthy foods" and manufacturers capitalise on this view. Claims on the presence of these ingredients can be seen on many labels. It is therefore important that the amounts of these ingredients be disclosed on the labels for consumer information.

## Quantitative Declaration of Ingredients (QUID)

This item has been on the agenda of CCFL for 7 years. The proposal is to strengthen the current section on QUID in the Codex General Standard for the Labelling of Pre-packaged Foods.

After lengthy discussions for over a day, there was general agreement that when an ingredient is emphasised to be present on the label, the percentage of that ingredient must

be disclosed on the label. "Emphasised to be present" can be through words or pictures or graphics.

For example, if a cereal product declares it is "with nuts", the amount of nuts must be declared. This will ensure that manufacturers actually have nuts in the product. This information will allow a consumer to choose between different brands of the product.

## Other agenda items

Guidelines for the Production, Processing, Labelling and Marketing of Organically Produced Foods have been discussed in CCFL for some years. In the current session, discussions were on several tables listing the additives that are permitted to be used in organic farming.

Considerable progress was made in the discussions. The most hotly debated item was the use of natural sodium nitrate, which has been discussed for the last five years in this Committee. After a lengthy deliberation, the Committee decided to disallow the use of this chemical in organic farming.

The draft standard on Labelling of Foods and Food Ingredients obtained through certain techniques of Genetic Modification/Genetic Engineering has been discussed for the last 14 years.

Over the years, the CCFL has not been able to arrive at consensus on this standard. In spite of this, most countries wanted CCFL to continue to work towards developing such a standard. It was therefore decided that a separate meeting shall be held in early 2008 in Ghana to try to make some progress before the next session of CCFL in May 2008.

A definition for advertising in relation to nutrition and health claims was also discussed in this session of CCFL. Member countries debated on a draft definition proposed and made minor amendments to it.

## Malaysia participates actively in Codex activities

Malaysia started participating actively in Codex activities from the 1960s. Since 1996, the Food Safety and Quality Division of MOH has been the Codex Secretariat for Malaysia. Before each Codex Committee meeting, a series of discussions are held in the country among relevant government departments, professional bodies, the food industry and consumer organizations to develop national positions.

The government sends representatives to a number of Codex Committee meetings annually. It has been realised over the years that it is important for the country to participate effectively in these meetings in order to ensure that the interest of the nation is taken care of.

In this particular case, Malaysia has presented its view points on various agenda items in this session of CCFL. Our positions have helped shape decisions made in the meeting.

Malaysia will continue to participate in the Codex standard setting process to ensure such standards gain greater general acceptance globally.

*\*A full report of the 35<sup>th</sup> Session of CCFL can be obtained from [www.codexalimentarius.net/web/index\\_en.jsp](http://www.codexalimentarius.net/web/index_en.jsp) in the next few weeks. More information on Codex Alimentarius and the standards published are also obtainable from this website.*

■ NutriScene is a fortnightly column by Dr Tee E Siong, who pens his thoughts as a nutritionist with over 30 years of experience in the research and public health arena. For further information, e-mail [starhealth@thestar.com.my](mailto:starhealth@thestar.com.my).

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THE most important food and nutrition meeting in the world is probably the just concluded 35<sup>th</sup> session of the Codex Committee on Food Labelling (CCFL). It was held in Ottawa, the capital city of Canada, in the first week of May, and was attended by over 300 participants from 79 countries and 27 observer organisations.

I would like to share with you highlights of this meeting in this instalment of *NutriScene*. I am sure those of you working in the area of food and nutrition will appreciate this update on this international development. Even the general reader may find this educational as the topics are relevant to our daily lives.

## Codex Alimentarius aims at protecting consumer health

Throughout most parts of the world, an increasing number of consumers and governments are becoming aware of food quality and safety issues and are realising the need to be selective about the foods people eat.

More consumers are demanding that their governments take legislative action to ensure that only safe food of acceptable quality is sold and that the risk of foodborne health hazards is minimised.

With this realisation, the Codex Alimentarius Commission (CAC) was created in 1963 by the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and the World Health Organisation (WHO).

The CAC is an intergovernmental organisation whose main objective is to develop a Joint FAO/WHO Food Standards Programme aimed at protecting the health of consumers and ensuring fair trade practices in the food trade.

After almost 50 years, the Programme has established the *Codex Alimentarius* (Latin, meaning food law or food code). This is a collection of standards, codes of practice, guidelines and other recommendations that serve to provide guidance to governments for their respective national food control systems. It aims to achieve international harmonisation in food quality and safety requirements.

More than 200 specific commodity standards for individual foods or groups of foods have been developed. In addition, a number of horizontal standards have been published to cover general topics including food labelling, nutrition and foods for special dietary uses, food additives, contaminants and methods of analysis and sampling.

## Codex standards on food labelling

Food labelling is the primary means of communication between the producer and seller of food on one hand, and the purchaser and consumer. Several Codex Alimentarius standards on food labelling have been developed, the main ones being for the labelling of pre-packaged foods, nutrition labelling, nutrition and health claims and guidelines for the use of the term "halal".

Codex standards on food labelling have been prepared through the Codex Committee on Food Labelling (CCFL). Like other Codex standards, these standards have been prepared through a well-defined, transparent set of procedures. Drafts are first prepared and circulated to governments for comment. These are then discussed in meetings of the CCFL, held annually and attended by member countries as well as non-governmental organisations.

Other standards of the Codex Alimentarius are similarly prepared through dedicated Committees. There are currently six General Subject Committees and five Commodity Committees that meet regularly to prepare or review standards and related texts.