

# Global food

**Important issues deliberated in recent international food standards committee meeting in Canada.**

**T**HE annual meeting of the Codex Committee on Food Labelling (CCFL) was held in Ottawa during the first week of May. Hosted by the government of Canada, the 36th meeting of CCFL was attended by close to 300 delegates representing 72 member countries, one Member Organization, European Community and 27 international organisations.

As part of the Malaysian delegation to this meeting, I would like to share with readers some highlights. Developments from this and other Codex meetings have important implications on local food regulations as Malaysia tries to harmonise local legislation with international standards.

## **Codex fosters consumer protection worldwide**

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.

## **Setting Codex standards on food labelling**

Food labelling is the primary means of communication between the producer and seller of food on the one hand, and the purchaser and consumer on the other.

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 and 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.

In this year's CCFL meeting, there was progress in some of the agenda items, whilst a couple of new items were also introduced.

## **Definition of advertising in relation to nutrition and health claims**

There has also been considerable amount of agreement on the proposed draft definition over the years. In this year's meeting, Member Countries did not wish to deliberate further on the wordings of the definition but commented on placement of this definition in Codex documents.

There was some disagreement on this, but after some deliberation, the Committee agreed that the definition would be included as a footnote to the word "advertising" in the Guidelines for Use of Nutrition and Health Claims.

The Committee concluded discussions on this agenda item and agreed to advance the draft definition for adoption by the CAC meeting in July.

## **Implementation of the Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health**

Recognising the heavy and growing burden of non-communicable diseases in almost all



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# labelling standards



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countries, the World Health Organisation (WHO) has developed a Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health.

A draft Action Plan on how Codex can assist in the implementation of the Global Strategy was prepared. Seven specific proposed actions were discussed at length during the CCFL meeting in 2007.

Five topics had considerable support from member countries and were further deliberated in this year's session. A separate working group meeting was held just before the main session on this agenda item. After deliberations in the main session, member countries agreed to work further on the following three areas:

1. Revision of the Guidelines on Nutrition Labelling concerning the list of nutrients that are always declared on a voluntary or mandatory basis and discussion of issues related to mandatory nutrition labelling;

2. Development of criteria/principles for legibility and readability of nutrition labels;

3. Labelling of foods identified as ingredients in the Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health.

A physical working group shall be held just before the CCFL session in May 2009 to discuss these topics.

## Labelling of genetically modified foods (GMFs)

The most hotly debated topic in the CCFL sessions is probably the draft recommendations for the labelling of foods obtained through certain techniques of genetic modification/genetic engineering (GM/GE).

This topic has been discussed by CCFL for more than 15 years and there has not been much progress. Indeed, the topic has been in danger of being abandoned by the Committee.

In the May 2008 session, the focus was on the report of a special working group held in Ghana in January this year.

The United States felt that the Committee should discontinue work on the development of a Codex text, as this item had been considered for many sessions and there was no prospect of reaching consensus. This position was supported by several countries.

On the other hand, the European Community and many other countries (including Malaysia) supported further work on GM/GE food labelling, on the basis that substantial progress was achieved in the working group meeting in Ghana.

These countries are in favour of further considering recommendations of the Ghana report, which had identified provisions that could be used to address the labelling of GM/GE foods.

Recognising that there was large support for proceeding with this work, the Committee decided to further deliberate on this in the

next session of CCFL in 2009, based on the report of the working group in Ghana.

## Other agenda items

The 2008 session of CCFL continued to deliberate on Guidelines for the Production, Processing, Labelling and Marketing of Organically Produced Foods. The discussions were on considering several additives to be used in organic farming.

The use of ethylene for ripening of kiwifruit and bananas and possibly other tropical fruits was also discussed. Committee members also discussed the deletion of preparations of rotenone used as an insecticide in organic farming.

Several other issues that are perhaps of interest to the region are the discussions on labelling provisions for Draft Standard for Gochujang (fermented grain with red chilli powder) and the Draft Standard for Ginseng Product. CCFL endorsed the proposed provisions after some discussions and minor amendments.

## Malaysia contributes actively to Codex activities

Malaysia has been participating in Codex activities since the 1960s. Since 1996, the Food Safety and Quality Division of MOH has been the Codex Secretariat for Malaysia.

Over the years, Malaysia has contributed actively to various Codex activities. We have successfully hosted several Codex meetings and working groups. Malaysia will commence to host the Codex Committee on Fats and Oils from 2009 onwards.

Malaysia is also the Vice-Chairperson of the CAC for the third term (2005-2008). Malaysia is contesting for the position of the Chair of the CAC, the election of which will take place in the upcoming session of the Commission in July.

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. 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 organisations to help develop national positions.

As in previous years, Malaysia has presented her view points on various agenda items in this session of CCFL. Our positions in the various issues I have highlighted in this write-up 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 36th 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).



[starhealth@thestar.com.my](mailto:starhealth@thestar.com.my)