Codex adopts new standards on GM foods, irradiation, and animal feed

In what it described as a “groundbreaking agreement”, the world’s top food standards body, Codex Alimentarius, has adopted guidelines to assess safety risks from genetically modified (GM) foods.

The guidelines will standardise existing national measures and were the highlight of some 50 new food safety standards—including new levels on irradiation of food products and meat hygiene standards—agreed by the joint WHO/Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) committee at a meeting in Rome ending on July 9.

“Now, any country, regulatory body, or other organisation or individual will be able to compare the risk assessments of a given food derived from biotechnology with the assessments done by other countries”, said Alan Randell, secretary of Codex.

“As long as the science is sound, each country wishing to use a given food derived from biotechnology will not have to redo the analysis, but can move directly to deciding how to manage the marketing of that food”, he said.

Adopted after 3 years of discussions—compared with the 10 years needed for many new Codex standards—the guidelines include pre-market safety evaluations and product tracing to allow GM foods to be monitored or recalled. They cover the scientific assessment of DNA-modified plants, such as maize, soya, or potatoes, and foods and drinks derived from DNA-modified micro-organisms, including cheese, yoghurt, and beer.

The guidelines also state that, if possible, authorities should take as the baseline a “comparable” food on the market—in other words examine the impact of the new genes on the original product.

“That’s a relatively new thing”, Juergen Schlundt, director of WHO’s Food Safety Division, told a press conference upon his return to Geneva. “In the past, there was not a lot of focus on the unintended effects. Now it is very clearly stated in these principles that you need to look, not only for what the new gene conveys, but what has happened in the genome of this plant in putting this gene there.”

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The guidelines were adopted by consensus at the 127-nation Codex meeting, with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as Greenpeace participating in the risk-analysis development, according to Schlundt.

They were agreed at the height of a longstanding row between the USA and the European Union over GM foods. The Bush administration recently complained to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) about EU restrictions and accused the 15-nation bloc of worsening the hunger crisis in Africa. The European Parliament on July 2 approved proposals for pre-market assessment and labelling but this has not defused the Transatlantic tensions (see Lancet 2003; 362: 135). Schlundt refused to say how much influence the Codex guidelines—which are not legally binding—would have in determining the outcome of the trade dispute.

“Codex gives guidelines and these are the best international guidelines we have at the moment, so the WTO would normally look to Codex. But it is not likely to be decided by Codex”, he said.

Although the guidelines assess purely the safety aspect of GM foods, Schlundt said that, in the longer term, WHO backed a “more holistic approach”.

“We believe you have to look at more than just health; more than just the environment. You also need to look at the ethical considerations”, he said, adding that research should be aimed not just at “a good return for some companies” but at “the public good”. In other moves, Codex agreed to raise existing limits of radiation on certain food products—such as spices—to eliminate bacterial spores and the Clostridium botulinum pathogenic bacteria. Randell said it would reduce the need for more toxic chemical methods.

The process has proved controversial in the UK and some other countries but Codex said that irradiated foods are safe and do not contain any radioactive traces.

It also agreed a code of practice on good animal feeding, calling for stricter controls over sources of contamination but stopping short of banning the use of animal by-products in feed.

Schlundt said that, aside from worries about bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), the main concern was about contaminants that work through the food chain, and the use of antimicrobial growth promoters in animal feed that promote antimicrobial resistance in humans.

“The important thing to remember is that the animal feed is part of the food chain”, said Schlundt. “That is the new approach that Codex, WHO, and FAO are trying to promote: from pre-farm to fork.”

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