

FAO/WHO guide for developing and improving national food recall systems



World Health
Organization



Food and Agriculture
Organization of the
United Nations

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Food and Agriculture
Organization of the United Nations
and World Health Organization
Rome 2012

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Methodology

A group of experts, selected by FAO/WHO, participated in the drafting of this document and were selected based on the following criteria:

- 1) Must be from a national competent authority for food safety, who has established food recall systems in the past or who has a solid experience in implementing food recalls and designing related tools such as traceability systems; and
- 2) Must be able to share documented national frameworks and processes for food recall during emergencies and share lessons learnt; or
- 3) Represents the views of the industry and trade sector with extensive experience in food safety emergency cooperation with public authorities during food safety emergencies, including recall implementation at national and international levels.

Upon selection of experts, a draft outline of the proposed document was shared in a virtual working group. Participants were then asked to share any relevant documents from their respective countries/agencies/ prior to the meeting. The physical meeting occurred over five days, during which time the drafting of the document took place. External reviewers were then selected to review the document based on referrals from meeting participants. FAO/WHO reviewed all comments prior to technical editing and finalization of the document.

Acronyms

FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
HACCP	Hazard analysis and critical control point
IHR	International Health Regulations
INFOSAN	International Food Safety Authorities Network
SLDB	Small and less developed businesses
WHO	World Health Organization
WTO	World Trade Organization

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

FAO/WHO has identified capacity development in food safety emergency response preparedness and planning to be a key element in preventing food safety emergencies and in mitigating their public health and socio-economic impacts. A framework for food safety emergency planning was developed to assist countries in the formulation and implementation of national food safety emergency response plans.¹ In doing so, it was recognized that further guidance was necessary to ensure that countries are prepared to address food safety emergencies. Consequently, FAO/WHO has developed a guide to the application of risk analysis principles and procedures during food safety emergencies.² The present document is an additional and essential guide on food recall to assist countries in the establishment and implementation of an effective national food recall system which may also be used during food safety emergencies.

Food recall is a fundamental tool in the management of risks in response to food safety events and emergencies. Some countries are still in need of an effective recall system and the necessary infrastructure to support it. For example, a robust legal basis/regulatory framework, effective pre-established protocols and the necessary collaboration between competent authorities and food business operators are required. In addition, foods and the ingredients in food products are increasingly grown, processed and consumed in different locations around the globe. This poses new challenges in the conduct of key activities associated with food recalls, such as the trace-forward and trace-back activities required for a food suspected or confirmed to be unsafe³. Even countries that have established the most advanced

¹ FAO/WHO. 2010. *FAO/WHO framework for developing national food safety emergency response plans*. (<http://www.fao.org/docrep/013/i1686e/i1686e00.pdf>)

² FAO/WHO. 2011. *FAO/WHO guide for the application of risk analysis principles and procedures during food safety emergencies*. (<http://www.fao.org/docrep/014/ba0092e/ba0092e00.pdf>)

³ Unsafe food is defined according to national legislation.

science-based national food control systems may be challenged by the globalization of food markets.

1.2 Purpose of the document

The purpose of the document is to support countries in establishing and implementing an effective national food recall system to respond to food safety events or emergencies. By drawing on demonstrated best practices, the elements for an effective national food recall system, and the process for establishing, reviewing and/or improving the national food recall system, are described as essential components of a national food control system⁴.

1.3 Target audience

The primary target audience comprises the competent authorities and all other national authorities working in the area of food safety. While developed mainly for government agencies, this document may also be useful for other organizations that engage in activities within the area of food safety, including those in the private sector. In recognition of the importance of relying on effective national food control systems in the application of food safety risk analysis during emergencies, this document also addresses the specific needs of countries that are in the process of developing their national food control systems.

1.4 Scope of the document

The document outlines best practice on how to: 1) develop and/or improve, 2) review and 3) implement effective national food recall systems as a key management option in the response to food safety events or emergencies.

This document should not be regarded as an additional standard, nor as a model for food recall, but rather as guidance based on a collection of examples of demonstrated good practice provided by experts from various parts of the world.

1.5 How to use the document

There are seven chapters in this document. The first (current) chapter is the introduction, which describes the background, purpose, target audience and scope. The second chapter introduces terminology relevant to food recall and traceability, including working definitions for this document, as well as the various purposes and

⁴ FAO 2006. *Strengthening national food control systems: guidelines to assess capacity building needs*. (<http://ftp.fao.org/docrep/fao/009/a0601e/a0601e00.pdf>)

practical types of food recall. The third chapter, “Preliminary steps for developing and/or improving national food recall systems”, outlines guidance for the preliminary activities performed when countries initiate the process to develop and/or improve national food recall systems. The fourth chapter, “National food recall systems”, discusses the key elements of a national food recall system. The fifth chapter, “Setting up and operating a national food recall system”, outlines practical actions that are useful to consider when implementing a national food recall system. The chapter also includes an example of a recall action decision tree. The sixth chapter, “Food recall management”, summarizes the main factors that are critical in food recall management, using an example of a food recall workflow as well as several example scenarios for different types of food recall, and example tools, checklists, questions and forms. The last chapter provides a conclusion and overall guidance for the development of effective national food recall systems.

Although this document can be used as a stand-alone resource, it is strongly recommended that it is read in conjunction with two FAO/WHO documents, entitled *FAO/WHO framework for developing national food safety emergency response plans* and the *FAO/WHO guide for the application of risk analysis principles and procedures during food safety emergencies* (see Resources).

2. Terminology relevant to food recall and traceability

2.1 Working definitions using the Codex terminology

In this document, some technical terms are applied that are based on the terms generally used in various Codex Alimentarius documents⁵. However it has been recognized that various aspects of terminology and definitions are specific to food recalls. They differ among countries, and translations in various languages increase the confusion associated with the terminology. In order to avoid such confusion, the following working definitions have been adopted for the purpose of this publication. Readers should note that these are not official FAO/WHO definitions, but terms that have been used in this document in an attempt to minimize misunderstanding.

Food recall: “The action to remove food from the market at any stage of the food chain, including that possessed by consumers”. In this document, food recalls are discussed in relation to food safety issues. Note on terminology: The term “withdrawal” is used widely in relation to food recall; however, the meaning of the term varies significantly among different countries and languages. For example, some countries use “withdrawal” to indicate the retrieval of a food item that did not reach consumers, while other countries use the same term to indicate the retrieval of a food item because of reasons unrelated to safety (e.g. quality). In addition, some other countries use “withdrawal” to indicate the retrieval of a food item by food business operators, in contrast to an action taken by the national authority. To avoid confusion, particular terms, such as “withdrawal”, that are used in some cases to indicate particular types of food recall, are not used in this document.

⁵ Codex Alimentarius Commission. <http://www.codexalimentarius.org>