



Opening Statement to the Oireachtas Public Accounts Committee

Meeting 8th March 2012



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Chief Executive

Food Safety Authority of Ireland

Chairman, Committee Members

I thank you Chairman for inviting the Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI) to update your Committee on our 2010 Annual Report. In making this presentation and addressing your queries, I am joined by my colleague Margaret Campbell, Finance and Planning Manager at the FSAI.

The Role of the Food Safety Authority of Ireland

The primary goal of the FSAI is to protect consumers' health in relation to food. The FSAI was established by law in 1999 as a single, independent, science based national body with responsibility for the enforcement of food law in Ireland.

The FSAI was set up to be independent of the food industry and we operate under the aegis of the Minister for Health. At the same time, we recognise the importance of the agri-food and hospitality sectors to the Irish economy. In particular, we are conscious of the significance to Ireland as a major exporter and tourist destination, that we provide reliable, trusted and independent regulation of the food sector. The significance of food safety to Ireland's international reputation, the value of maintaining a world class food safety regime and an efficient regulatory and compliance system, is openly acknowledged by the food industry in Ireland.

Our principal function is to take all reasonable steps to ensure that food consumed, distributed, marketed or produced in Ireland meets the highest standards of food safety and hygiene. We are also charged with bringing about the general acceptance that the primary responsibility for safety of food is borne by the food industry across the food chain.

To these ends, we have identified four main roles. These are: enforcing food law; using best scientific advice to underpin all food safety decisions; working in partnership with all stakeholders to gain their commitment to maintain and improve standards and; ensuring that the FSAI is responsive, proportionate and adaptable, as well as being efficient and effective.

FSAI Service Contracts

Day-to-day enforcement of food law is carried out on behalf of the FSAI by other State organisations known legally to us as official agencies. These agencies are authorised by the FSAI through a renewable fixed term service contract. All service contracts are published on the FSAI's website.

The FSAI co-ordinates the activities of these agencies to achieve the most effective and efficient use of these State resources in policing the food chain, so as to protect consumers' health and consumers' interests. These agencies are accountable to the FSAI for their food safety programmes, their standards of work and their actions in

relation to food law enforcement. The FSAI also audits the agencies for their compliance with the service contract commitments.

The service contract process provides a very practical mechanism for co-ordination and harmonisation of food safety control delivery and allows the FSAI to keep the efficacy of the inspection services nationwide under review.

The main official agencies are: the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, the Local Authorities, the Health Service Executive, the Sea-Fisheries Protection Authority and the Marine Institute. Apart from the Local Authorities whose food controls are funded by the FSAI, all other agencies fund their food controls from within their own resources.

Important as food law enforcement is, achieving high standards of food safety requires complementary strategies. The FSAI has always believed in the promotion and development of a culture of food safety in Ireland, by engaging with all those who can directly influence or improve food safety practices. Stakeholders with whom we seek to connect include: the food industry and their representative groups, consumer groups and State agencies that can positively influence food safety standards.

In the past few years, I believe the FSAI has been a significant party to some noteworthy achievements. These include: the reduction in the incidence of human salmonellosis, the virtual elimination of BSE in Irish cattle, a significant reduction in the salt content of processed foods; the introduction of a "food allergen alert" service for consumers and the supplementation of all infants in Ireland with vitamin D.

Through our management of service contracts with our official agencies, we have clarified the role of each official agency, minimised any gaps or overlaps in the supervision of the food chain and thus, ensured the resources of the State are used to the best advantage. We have worked to guarantee scientific excellence in a spirit of independence, openness and transparency.

Science remains an essential element of the FSAI. Through our in-house scientific staff, our externally resourced scientific committee, our networking and connections with international expert bodies, such as the European Food Safety Authority, we seek to ensure that all advice we give and every decision we make is informed by the best science.

The FSAI advises on scientific and technical aspects of the legislation and participates in expert working groups of the European Commission, in the preparation of EU food regulations. We provide fact sheets, guidance notes, codes of practice and answer around 11,000 queries from the public and industry each year. As Ireland's contact point for the European Commission's Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed, we process and assess over 9,000 notifications every year, concerning contaminated foods in circulation in the single market.

The FSAI has matured as an organisation, which was perhaps best evidenced by the swift and decisive handling of the dioxin contamination of Irish pork incident in 2008. In 2009 the FSAI was honoured by the World Health Organization with its prestigious Food Safety Award, in recognition of our work in the international food safety arena.

The FSAI's remit does not cover the entire food chain. When the FSAI was set up in 1999 it was given responsibility for food safety from the farm gate forwards. Animal feed controls and animal health controls on the farm remain the responsibility of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. The controls governing the approval or licensing and inspection of animal feed establishments and the marketing of animal feeds are not included in the service contract between the FSAI and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

Since the dioxin incident of 2008, the FSAI has worked closely with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine on risk assessment of the animal feed sector and is cooperating on the proposed transfer of functions associated with oversight and responsibility for controls on animal feed.

Finally Mr Chairman, I might add that as Chief Executive, I am keenly aware of the pressing national need to do "more with less". In response to Government policy, staff numbers were reduced by just over 10% and expenditure by approximately €1.2 million. At the same time, I believe we have worked hard to maintain the same level of service.

The FSAI has a unique role to play as the State's food safety regulator. Our aim is that Irish consumers and the consumers of Irish food at home and abroad are fully protected and that confidence is maintained in the safety of Irish produced foods. In pursuit of this aim we are committed to continuing to maintain and develop a regulatory system that is trusted by consumers, has the confidence of the food sector and is acknowledged both at home and abroad as even-handed and balanced in its actions.