



Directorate-General for Health & Food safety

**Effective risk communication
maintaining/restoring consumer confidence:
experiences from recent contamination events
in the EU.**

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INTRODUCTION

- Particular situation in the EU: interaction between Commission, national competent authority, national and EU risk assessment instances
- Difference in approach of communication in contamination incidents occurring in the EU or occurring outside the EU but affecting the EU via import.
- Presentation relates to contamination incidents related to chemical hazards/risks and my personal experiences/views related to these incidents

Role of the Commission

(points related to communication in bold)

Role of the Commission - contamination incident in Member States (MS)

- Ensure that competent authority of the MS concerned takes all the necessary measures to protect public health, to manage the contamination incident (source identification, measures to reduce/eliminate the source, tracing/tracking of contaminated farms/food/feed/animals and block the contaminated products)
- Assessment of the effectiveness of the measures; In case of need, Commission can take additional measures

Role of the Commission - contamination incident in Member States (MS)

- Ensure that competent authorities provide the necessary information related to the contamination incident and in particular the distribution of contaminated product through the Rapid Alert System for Feed and Food (RASFF)
- **Information of the MS through the RASFF on the contamination incident / distribution of potentially contaminated feed/food**

Role of the Commission - contamination incident in Member States (MS)

- **Information to competent authorities of Third Countries as regards the contamination incident**, distribution of contaminated products to these third countries (via RASFF), providing guarantees as regards safety of exported products not affected by contamination incident
- Assist, if needed, the competent authority of the Member State in the management of the contamination incident
- **Communication on the incident to the media.**

Role of the Commission - contamination incident in Third Country (TC)

- Request guarantees that TC concerned takes the necessary measures to protect public health, to manage the contamination incident
- Ensure that TC provides the necessary information related to the contamination incident and in particular the distribution of contaminated product to the EU through the Rapid Alert System for Feed and Food (RASFF)
- **Information of the MS through the RASFF on the contamination incident / distribution of potentially contaminated feed/food**

Role of the Commission - contamination incident in Third Country (TC)

- Assessment of the effectiveness of the measures
- In case of need, Commission can take protective measures at EU level.
- **Communication to the media on the incident but more important on the measures taken**

Role of the Commission – communication

- **Communication with competent authorities (MS and TC) and to the media** - Different nature/type of communication
- **but** coherence between the messages provided to competent authorities and to media is necessary



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Principles of effective communication – from experience

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Basic and most important principle:

- Effective risk communication maintaining /restoring consumer confidence **only possible if the contamination incident is efficiently managed**

So effective management of the contamination incident is the "conditio sine qua non"

Principles of effective communication – from experience

- Be transparent and complete: tell what you know and what you don't know.
- Clearly differentiate between certainties and uncertainties.
- Communicate in a simple and straightforward way the certainties but do not hide the uncertainties.
- But put the uncertainties in the right context.
- Clearly differentiate between hazard and risk.
- Obtain within very short notice advice on the (hazard)/risk from an authoritative risk assessment body

Principles of effective communication – from experience

- (Try to) ensure consistency in the messages given by different instances (Commission, national authorities, EU and national risk assessment bodies).
- Ensure in the course of the incident consistency in the messages provided on the incident - in case situation has changed following new information - put the new information in the context with previous messages (in particular the expressed uncertainties) on the incident.
- Ensure that the measures taken are in proportion/in line to the risk communicated (taking into account certainties and uncertainties)

Challenges in effective communication to maintain consumer confidence

- Source of contamination unknown /not unequivocally determined.
- Lack of traceability.
- Lack of information (e.g. on levels found, ...)
- Large uncertainty as regards the possible health risk
- Extension of contamination (increase of scope of products affected) during contamination incident.

→ Management measures need to address these challenges to enable an effective communication to maintain consumer confidence



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Concrete examples of contamination incidents

Dioxin/PCB contamination incident in Belgium in 1999

- Late information to the public on contamination incident.
- Uncertainty as regards source of contamination
- Lack of traceability
- Continuous extension of scope of products affected by the incident
- In the beginning no efficient management of the incident (also because of absence of appropriate management tools – cheap, quick and reliable screening methods, no common levels of acceptance at EU level, ...)
- ...

→ **Loss of confidence of EU population**

Dioxin incident pork meat in Ireland in 2008

- Effective communication – effective management
 - Once extent of contamination known: immediate communication – 6/12/2008
 - Source of contamination known – starting point of contamination
 - National measures to protect public health immediately taken
 - EFSA assessment on very short notice (10/12/2008)
 - Guidelines at EU level to manage the incident (in particular as regards composite foods) (10/12/2008)
- confidence of EU population in the measures taken**

Melamine in products from China in 2008

- Effective communication – effective management
 - Once information received: immediate communication via RASFF to competent authorities (15/09/2008)
 - Source of contamination known – extent unknown
 - Request to EFSA for **urgent scientific advice** assessment of the risks for public health. (19/09/2008)
 - Certain concern for public health in the EU identified (children) (24/09/2008)
 - **Immediate** proportionate restrictive measures as regards products from China taken.(26/09/2008)
 - Measures updated in function of new information.
- **confidence of EU population in the measures taken**

Radioactivity in products from Japan in 2011

- Effective communication – effective management
- Incident occurred on 11 March 2011
- Japanese authorities informed the Commission that radionuclide levels in certain food products in Japan exceeded the action levels in food applicable in Japan
- On 15 March 2011, Commission recommended via RASFF to the member States to carry out analysis of radioactivity in feed and food from Japan.
- On 25 March 2011, the Commission adopted, as a precautionary measure, measures as regards the import of feed and food originating in or consigned from Japan.
- Regulation regularly amended and replaced

→ Issues as regards confidence of EU population in the measures taken



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Effective communication closely related to effective management of contamination incident

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Tools for efficient management of food safety incidents

- Having the legal possibility/basis to take all necessary management/emergency measures to manage the incident
- Having the possibility to get (clear) scientific advice on (very) short notice from authoritative source (EFSA)
- Possibility to quickly exchange accurate information among competent authorities (RASFF)



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Tools for efficient management of food safety incidents

- **Traceability** is of major importance to enable a quick, precise and reliable containment of the contamination incident
- Levels of acceptance (maximum levels, action levels, ...) are necessary for a efficient management of contamination incidents
- Quick, cheap and reliable screening methods of analysis
- Responsibility of feed and food business operators.



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