SFA Regulators' Forum on Novel Food, 19 Nov 2019

The Singapore Food Agency (SFA) organised a half day Regulators' Forum on Novel Foods at the Ministry of Sustainability and Environment (MSE) Theatrette on 19 November 2019. The session brought together the industry, research community and the government to share and discuss about the rapidly developing novel food sector.

The Forum started with presentations covering the following topics from representatives from SFA, Agency for Science, Technology and Research (A*STAR), Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ), the China National Center for Food Safety Risk Assessment (CFSA), and DuPont Nutrition & Biosciences.

- SFA's experiences in novel foods *(Mr Teng Yong Low, Food Regulatory Management Division, SFA)*
- Novel Food Innovation Through 21st Century Safety Science *(Dr Benjamin Smith, Director, Innovations in Food & Chemical Safety Programme, A*STAR)*
- Novel Food Regulation in New Zealand & Australia *(Mr Glen Neal, General Manager, Risk Management & Intelligence, FSANZ)*
- Current Regulatory Status of Novel Food Ingredients in China *(Dr Zhang Jianbo, CFSA)*
- Safety Evaluation of Microbial Products *(Dr Vincent Sewalt, Senior Director, Regulatory Science & Advocacy, DuPont Nutrition & Biosciences)*

Following the presentations, Dr Vincent Sewalt moderated a panel discussion with the following panellists:

- *Dr Lee Kim Tan, Director-General, Food Administration & Deputy CEO, SFA*
- *Dr Benjamin Smith, Director, Innovations in Food & Chemical Safety Programme, A*STAR*
- *Mr Glen Neal, General Manager, Risk Management & Intelligence, FSANZ*
- Dr Zhang Jianbo*, CFSA*
- *Ms Deepti Kulkarni, Partner, Sidley Austin*

The panel broadly discussed 3 topics:

(i) <u>Building a robust working relationship between regulators and industry players and facilitating international trade of novel foods</u>

The panel highlighted that building consumer trust and acceptance through ensuring the safety of novel foods was a priority for both regulators and industry – product recalls are costly for businesses and unmitigated food safety risks are detrimental to public health. This common ground served as a basic foundation on which to foster collaboration between regulators and industry players.

The panel also noted separately that industry should consider working to raise their considerations in tandem (e.g. via trade associations) to discuss their concerns with regulators rather than as individual companies. This would allow regulators to better understand and address industry needs.

A question arose as to whether harmonisation efforts in biotechnology at the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum could be translated to novel foods. The panel noted that international food standards are harmonised by the Codex Alimentarius Commission and that Codex currently does not have a framework for setting novel food standards. It was also noted

that the considerations of stakeholders were likely to be different between biotechnology and novel foods.

(ii) Preventing "over regulation"

The panel discussed what precautions could be taken to prevent "over regulation" of novel foods. It is noted that different stakeholders would have different perspectives to this. For example, what industry could view as 'regulatory overreach' may be 'precaution' for other stakeholder groups such as consumers.

The panel agreed that ensuring transparency in processes, and setting regulatory requirements using science-based risk assessment principles would be key. Drawing on past experiences, the panel noted that the inclusion of risk benefit analysis could be useful in bridging the divide between stakeholder groups. The panel also noted that there could be legal safeguards that can act as a check and balance.

The panel also discussed how "regulatory overreach" in the area of novel foods could be mitigated through the concept of 'substantial equivalence', which requires companies to demonstrate that a novel food is as safe as its traditional counterpart. Although the concept could be useful, the panel also noted that there remained challenges in implementation, such as determining the exact aspects of the processing steps which need to be evaluated to be 'substantially equivalent' to the traditional counterpart, as well as deciding who should set these standards.

(iii) Effective consumer engagement in the area of novel foods

The panel concluded the session by discussing how consumers could be engaged in the area of novel foods, particularly since some consumers may hold various perceptions regarding the risks of such foods. The panel noted that there were opportunities for industry to group together to conduct pre-competitive research that could help address consumers' perceptions. Other areas such as considering variations in dietary habits and genotypic/phenotypic patterns in local populations when assessing exposure could also serve to assure consumers.

The panel also cautioned that both regulators and industry should avoid viewing consumers as being scientifically misinformed and strive to communicate using tripartite approach towards food safety, as a joint responsibility between government, industry and consumers. Consumers can actually have a sophisticated view of food safety risks, as they are exposing themselves and their families to these risks.

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Acknowledgments

SFA gratefully acknowledges Temasek Holdings' support in organising this Forum at the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Agri-Food Innovation Week (20-22 November 2019). We also thank all speakers, panellists, and participants for the open sharing of views and experiences. SFA will continue to identify opportunities to drive discussions on the safety of novel food and alternative proteins to support Singapore's "30 by 30" goal.
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