

“Zero tolerance policies impede trade, food security and innovation”



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As part of IYP 2016, GPC's Market Access Committee has been actively lobbying in Rome and Geneva on the need to reform Codex processes, against this negative trend towards individual country MRL setting and zero tolerance policies for pesticides or contaminants as we are witnessing increasingly in the trade with default or zero limits.

Ag commodity traders cannot operate nor can the trade fulfil its role in feeding an ever increasing population. Not only is process reform key to further global alignment of MRLs, but also to encourage a wider acceptance of Codex limits globally, to avoid trade disruption, as experienced with glyphosate on lentils to the EU or more recently with changes in ergot limits on grains halting shipments to Egypt.

IYP 2016 has been the launch-pad for these discussions and has brought these trade issues to the attention of member-governments who now have the issue firmly on their radar for the benefit of both importers and exporters, developed and developing worlds.

Advocacy emphasising the need to have robust international standards to facilitate trade continued with GPC organising a

side event in FAO on “The role of standards to facilitate trade of agricultural commodities for food security and nutrition” on 4th October.

The event took place during the Codex Committee on Commodity Problems (CCCP) in FAO with Mr Huseyin Arslan, GPC's President, speaking on the perspectives of the pulses sector, experience with non alignment of MRLs globally and risk for developing countries. He explained the work of the GPC market access committee in addressing capacity and methodology problems, and spoke about the broadening of the coalition to include already 16 commodity sectors facing similar challenges on Codex MRLs, from tea to dried fruits; the aim being develop a catch-up plan quantifying the number of MRLs outstanding which are causing trade problems due to the time lag in Codex setting MRLs after national approvals for use.

Through Ms June Arnold, Gafta, one of the commodity sectors represented in GPC's coalition, emphasised the importance of international standards to commodity traders and the need to have robust Codex MRLs to ensure food safety, facilitate trade and improve food security. Trade unpredictability and trends towards zero thresholds are two examples that have negative impacts

on trade and food security and constrain market access for agricultural commodities, impeding innovation and farmers' access to new techniques and products.

The challenge for the trade is not only to comply with zero tolerances which are commonly applied by countries as they wait for international standards but as testing technology is cheaper, easier and more sensitive it has become a constant problem. The impact of zero tolerance policies needs further discussion and is not well understood. A clear explanation is needed within these regulatory settings to raise awareness of the impact of these decisions which slow down or prohibit trade, particularly with the support of importing countries.

Codex standards are based on best available science, are consensus based and are the only truly global relevant standards in existence. It is for this reason that the coalition is asking member-countries to invest in Codex and provide greater resourcing from financial and technical capacity to make the process more efficient and to consider other measures.

Following this CCCP event, GPC welcomes the news that FAO is now setting up an internal workgroup to look at ways to improve financing of Codex and WHO work, expected to be created in November. The issue is back on the agenda.

Codex members cover 99% of the world's population. More and more developing countries are taking an active part in the Codex process. Being an active member of Codex helps countries to compete in sophisticated world markets - and to improve food safety for their own population. At the same time exporters know what importers demand, and importers are protected from substandard shipments.

During the World Committee on Food Security meeting that took place during 17-21st October in FAO Rome, GPC and Gafta took part in bilateral meetings with several government delegations including Canada, Australia, USA, Switzerland, Egypt, Japan, Iran and Kuwait to underline the impact of zero policies on trade and the need for Codex reform along with a wider acceptance

of Codex MRLs as outlined above. The trade is fatigued chasing this disappearing zero which is counterproductive as it does not provide any additional consumer protection, adds costs to consumers, and additional food waste as perfectly safe food shipments are restricted impacting on food security. "I would again emphasize that the issue here is that regulatory gaps caused shipments of safe, nutritious lentils to be treated as a food safety breach, and rejected - randomly and unpredictably, harming farmers and consumers. While these were Canadian lentils, this concern is as relevant to pulse farmers in Uganda or Ethiopia as it is to Canadian farmers".

If exporters in developed countries are struggling with the capacity to keep up with these risks, it will be more difficult for emerging markets. Considering it is IYP this year and we have seen countries like Myanmar, Ethiopia and Tanzania rapidly growing their pulse sector, How do they keep up? What of China and India, for whom trade is a vital part of food security? or newly traded commodities such as Quinoa?

An event to underline these broader issues from a scientific viewpoint and supported by importing countries may be organised by the coalition going forward to gain traction beyond 2016. There needs to be recognition that if no MRL exists, should data be lacking, then an international Codex MRL should be acceptable for authorities with a constant focus on harmonisation.

The future that we would propose is a Codex that is fully equipped to develop a timely and fulsome set of tolerances to avert potentially widespread zero tolerances, ensuring the ability of trade to move commodities to the people who need them. We support a strong and well-functioning Codex in principle, as well as in recognition that the alternative is each country with its own system which is disastrous for the trade.

While the potential for disruption of food shipments due to regulatory gaps is not new, I would emphasise that we have the potential together to get in front of this problem. If we're all on the same page about where we're going, we'll have the best chance of actually getting there.

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Eat more pulses,
help fight hunger,
save the world”

