

**Senate Community Affairs Committee**

**ANSWERS TO ESTIMATES QUESTIONS ON NOTICE**

**HEALTH AND AGEING PORTFOLIO**

**Supplementary Budget Estimates 2012-2013, 17 & 19 October 2012**

**Question: E12-222**

**OUTCOME 1:** Population Health

**Topic:** ANTIMICROBIAL RESISTANT BACTERIA ON FOOD

**Type of Question:** Written Question on Notice

**Number of pages:** 2

**Senator:** Senator Di Natale

**Question:**

- a) What is Food Standards Australia and New Zealand's risk assessment for antimicrobial residue? Has the risk been assessed as low, medium or high? On what basis has this assessment been made? What is the surveillance and testing regime in place for antimicrobial residue?
- b) What is Food Standards Australia and New Zealand's risk assessment for antimicrobial resistant bacteria on food? Has the risk been assessed as low, medium or high? On what basis has this assessment been made? What is the surveillance and testing regime in place for antimicrobial resistant bacteria on food?
- c) How often since the JETACAR Report have imported foods been tested for the presence of antimicrobial resistant bacteria? When has this testing occurred and how much food was tested?
- d) What is Food Standards Australia and New Zealand's assessment of the prevalence of antimicrobial resistant bacteria on domestically produced food (as communicated to Food Safety Australia and New Zealand via states and territories or through own testing)?

**Answer:**

- a) The risk assessment of antimicrobial residues is undertaken on a collegiate basis by a number of agencies, including the Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority (APVMA), the Office of Chemical Safety (OCS) in the Department of Health and Ageing, the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) and Food Standards Australia and New Zealand (FSANZ).

The risk of antimicrobial residues is assessed on a case-by-case basis and therefore the generic risk cannot be assessed as 'low, medium or high'. Antimicrobials in food are regulated through the Maximum Residue Limit (MRL) Standard (Standard 1.4.2) in the Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code. MRL levels enable monitoring of whether an antimicrobial has been used as directed on an approved label.

The APVMA, together with the OCS, determines an MRL after a comprehensive evaluation of a chemical product's chemistry, metabolism, analytical methodology and residue trial data. FSANZ carries out the dietary exposure assessment to residues in the diet as part of the MRL setting process. The permitted limits are set well below the level that would be harmful, so a residue level slightly above the limit may indicate misuse but is unlikely to pose a health risk.

A number of Commonwealth and state and territory agencies undertake surveillance programs for antimicrobial residues. FSANZ routinely reviews antimicrobial residues in its Australian Total Diet Surveys (ATDS). The Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) undertakes the National Residue Survey, which includes testing for antimicrobials. Imported food is also inspected by DAFF to ensure it complies with the MRL standards. The levels of antimicrobial residues in food in Australia, if at all detected, have been consistently low and well below levels established by the APVMA. The ATDS consistently shows that trace levels of antimicrobial residues present in food pose no health concern for consumers.

- b) FSANZ does not routinely undertake risk assessments for antimicrobial resistant bacteria on food. However, at the request of DAFF in 2010, FSANZ did undertake a risk assessment on apples imported from New Zealand harvested from trees potentially treated with the antimicrobial streptomycin to control the plant disease fire blight. The risk assessment concluded that there was a negligible increased risk to Australian consumers from potential exposure to antimicrobial resistant organisms. This was confirmed by internationally-recognised experts in the field of antimicrobial resistance, who peer-reviewed the FSANZ assessment.

Where necessary, FSANZ seeks advice from expert groups under the NHMRC on the potential risks from antimicrobial resistance during the pre-market assessment of certain food additives (e.g. specific preservatives).

- c) Through DAFF's Imported Food Inspection Scheme, specific imported foods are tested for antimicrobial residues, for example, honey is tested for chloramphenicol, nitrofurans, streptomycin, tetracycline and sulphonamides. Imported food is not tested for the presence of antimicrobial resistant bacteria.
- d) FSANZ concurs with the outcomes of the 2008 survey of antimicrobial resistant bacteria (carried out for the Food Regulation Standing Committee by Food Science Australia) that the prevalence of antimicrobial resistant bacteria in domestic food is low.