Senate Community Affairs Committee

ANSWERS TO ESTIMATES QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

HEALTH PORTFOLIO

Supplementary Budget Estimates 2014 - 2015, 22 October 2014

Ref No: SQ14-001342

OUTCOME: 1 – Population Health

Topic: Testing of Nanomaterials in Food

Type of Question: Written Question on Notice

Senator: Siewert, Rachel

Question:

FSANZ has said (SQ14-000573) that there is "no evidence to date" that would warrant food testing. On your website, you claim that "Any new foods manufactured using nanotechnologies that may present safety concerns will have to undergo a comprehensive scientific safety assessment before they can be legally supplied in Australia and New Zealand.

a) Is this accurate? If yes: Wouldn't you agree then, that nano TiO2 'may present safety concerns'? Would you agree that there is evidence – but that you don't think it is sufficient to warrant testing, particularly in light of the costs and complexities involved?

b) Would you agree that you don't know whether those nanomaterials are being used in foods available in Australia?

c) Would you agree as well that you don't know whether these foods containing nanomaterials are safe for human consumption?

d) So, what is the threshold that will say there is enough evidence to warrant testing or other regulatory intervention?

Answer:

a) Yes. Any new or novel materials which may present safety concerns will have to undergo safety assessment before they can be legally supplied in Australia.

There is permission for the use of titanium dioxide (INS No. 171) in processed foods in accordance with Good Manufacturing Practice in Schedule 1 of Standard 1.3.1 – Food Additives in the Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code (the Code). Titanium dioxide is used in a range of food products and has been used safely for many years.

Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) is further reviewing the scientific literature for certain insoluble materials with existing permissions in the Code, to determine whether there is any justification to establish specifications based on particle size, based on the best scientific evidence.

b) FSANZ has not received an application to amend the Code in relation to a new or novel nanoscale material. Accordingly, FSANZ is not aware that any such nanoscale materials are being used in the food supply.

c) Not applicable.

d) In developing or reviewing food regulatory measures and variations, FSANZ must have regard to the need for standards to be based on risk analysis using the best available scientific evidence. FSANZ undertakes its risk analysis processes to achieve a low overall risk range, protective of public health and safety.

In prioritising food surveillance activities, FSANZ considers a number of criteria including whether: the substance has been identified as a cause for concern in Australia or internationally; the dietary exposure may exceed recognised safe levels; and the level of community benefit that may result from undertaking the survey. This needs to be determined on a case-by-case basis, for the specific food substance in question.