



Assuring Food Safety in the BFAD Strengthening Program: A Collective Will

Food safety is a public concern. Accessibility and availability of safe foods is a basic right of every Filipino. However, the obligation of keeping the safety of food is a shared responsibility in the Philippines. Since food safety incidents are related to health risks and consequences, the Department of Health (DOH) plays an important role to assure that the food being prepared or eaten will not cause harm to its consumers. Being the principal health agency in the country, measures are undertaken for prevention and control of food safety problems.

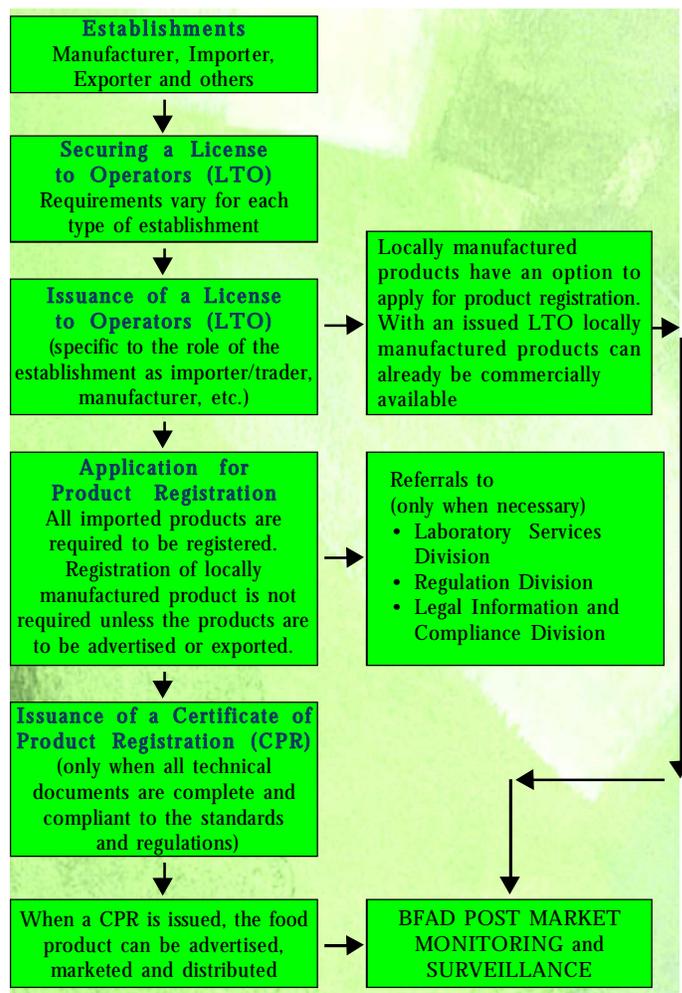
Considering that food products undergo numerous handling from farm to plate, the need to have a strong food control system must be established. In the Philippines, the Bureau of Food and Drugs (BFAD) under the leadership of DOH has been implementing the country's food control system in partnership with other government agencies. However, recent food safety incidents, such as the deliberate melamine contamination of milk and milk products from China that was initially found in pet food products in 2006, sparked the interests of the public to examine the current status of food control system.

BFAD serves as DOH's key regulatory agency and implementer of the country's food control system. Republic Act (RA) 3720, mandates the agency to ensure safe and good quality processed food, drug and cosmetics and to regulate the production, sale and traffic of the same to protect the health of the consumer. Further, the Consumer Act of the Philippines or RA 7394 reiterated BFAD's duty "to protect consumers from adulterated or unsafe product with false, deceptive and misleading information." RA 7394 involves other national agencies like the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG) with the Local Government Units (LGUs), and the Department of Agriculture (DA) to ensure food protection.

DOH through BFAD has been ensuring food safety by enforcing the following activities:

- Inspection and licensing of food establishments;
- product registration; and
- continuous post marketing surveillance which includes monitoring of trade outlets and product advertisements and product sampling at manufacturers' level

Figure 1 Flowchart on BFAD regulations for processed food products



- BFAD’s work continues as it performs inspection and licensing of food establishments; product registration and post marketing surveillance. These activities are carried out by trained food inspectors called Food and Drug Regulation Officers (FDROs). They conduct inspection of food manufacturers and importers engaged in the manufacturing, packing, repacking, distributing and holding of food to assure the safety and quality of foods intended for domestic consumption and for exports. Currently, there are 210 FDROs tasked to perform these activities nationwide.
- FDRO’s based in the central office have specific and specialized assignments. As for their counterparts in the region, FDROs work both as Food and Drug establishments’ inspectors/ auditors and mostly have Pharmacy background and not on Food Science and Technology/ Chemistry/ Nutrition / Chemical Engineering.

To date, FDROs cover the following number of establishments nationwide:

Type of Establishment	Number
Food Manufacturers ¹	11,923
Exporters ²	66
Exporter/Wholesaler	30
Importer	2,137
Importer/exporter	14
Importer/exporter/wholesaler	3
Importer/wholesaler	57
Wholesaler	557

Reports also showed that growth rates of the regulated products and establishments have overtaken the institutional capacity of BFAD to regularly enforce standards and rules. This is a result of trade liberalization which has opened our markets to other countries as well as giving export opportunities for local products.

With this trend, it is inevitable that there will be increased demand for laboratory services, post market surveillance and food manufacturers monitoring all over the Philippines. In Figure 1, it shows that products especially those being imported and exported need to be BFAD compliant to guarantee its safety and quality. With export and import products entry to the market on the rise, services of BFAD will have great demand. Another factor involved for higher demands of government laboratory is that they are cheaper compared with the private sector.

One of the agency’s laboratories is housed at the central office and two satellites are strategically located in Cebu and Davao. There are 9 private facilities and 5 additional government counterpart laboratories recognized by BFAD (Bureau Circular No. 06 s. 2005) to aid them in product testing. However, not all of these facilities can provide all types of analysis needed and the BFAD satellite laboratory in Cebu is not fully functional. Thus, most product samples for testing are shipped to Manila.

There is no doubt about the technical expertise in improving the laboratory analysis but the lack of available infrastructure and laboratory equipment hinders the carrying out of these tasks. In addition, there is a decline of human resources within the agency in 2007 (BFAD, 2008). Opportunities in the private sector and overseas are more attractive to government professionals who are oftentimes overworked and underpaid.

There are food safety measures being implemented. One of them is the promotion of Good Manufacturing Practice (GMP), Good Distribution and Storage Practice and Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points (HACCP) among establishments. Compliance to these is contributory to the maintenance of quality and safety standards of food products.

In reality, there are imported food products proliferating in the market even without BFAD registration. Furthermore, since registration of food products is not mandatory, unless these will be exported or advertised, there is a need to strengthen pre and post market monitoring. Compliance to labeling regulations must be integrated during inspection of food establishments as additional measure in pre-market monitoring.

The responsibility of food safety is delegated to different agencies and organizations. The goal is to provide the consumers with total health protection and the reduction of the risk of food- and water-borne diseases. Table 1 presents national agencies identified to implement the food safety programs in the country.

¹ Data as of October 2008

² Data as of August 2008 from exporters to wholesalers

The Philippine government was tasked with the following:

Food safety policy

To develop food safety policies in combination with food security, quality and nutrition, consistent with international requirements for participation in international trade.

Food legislation

To regularly evaluate and revise their food legislation to ensure that they best protect their populations and facilitate international trade in safe food.

In spite of the existence of agencies at the national level working to keep food safe, the programs in the country are departmentalized. The report prepared by the Philippines during the second FAO/WHO Global Forum of Food Safety regulators found that although these departmentalized programs are functional, there is a perceived need for an operational nationally coordinated program on food safety to achieve a more integrated and effective food control system (FAO, 2004).

At the local level, local government units have also their share to ensure their constituents of the safety of food through enforcement of food safety regulations and accessing resources to enhance compliance (Lizada, 2007). LGU's have the general power as provided in the Local Government Code of 1991 to promote public health and safety.

At the collective level, consumers' demand for quality is a potent force in a food safety program. Unfortunately, a concerted move to make consumers aware of the availability and reliability of information on food safety is lacking in the country (Lizada, 2007).

Table 1. Agencies involved with Food Safety Program in the Philippines (FAO, 2004)

Agencies Involved	Task(s) Assigned
Department of Agriculture (DA)	Ensures not only security in food but also assures food safety from the farm, the safe use of pesticides, drugs and feeds and control of food and animal disease from production to harvesting.
Department of Trade and Industry (DTI)	Oversees the safety of food in trade and protects consumers from unsafe food during transport, trading and merchandising activities. Assists food producers, industry and trade to ensure the safety of food and require these sectors to participate in providing food safety and quality in all their food products.
Department of Science and Technology (DOST)	Encourages and supports a coordinated approach to food safety research, gives priority to research that aims to providing the necessary data to better manage food safety and to improve food processing technologies.
Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG with the LGUs)	is responsible for food safety implementation as well as food handler's training in the local government units. Assists both the retail and food service sectors, particularly street food vendors, to ensure the safety of food and require these sectors to participate in providing food safety and quality in all their products.
Department of Health (DOH)	Prioritize food inspection activities according to consumer risk, facilitate the provision of training and develop operating guidelines with adequate support from the government (BFAD). Strengthen national analytical capacity by the provision of appropriate training and resources, and the establishment of quality assurance protocols and procedures (BFAD). Identify the need for, and most appropriate approach to, food-borne and water-borne disease surveillance and provide necessary resources (National Epidemiology Center and National Center for Disease Prevention and Control).
Academe, NGOs, civil society, consumer groups	The academe conducts researches on the causes and transmission of food-borne illnesses, help in education on treatment and prevention of food borne illnesses. Consumer groups assist consumers to become aware of the importance of access to safe and nutritious food as well as require them (or their representatives) to participate in national efforts to assure the safety and nutritious nature of food for the community. Recognize the need for, and facilitate a short-term and long-term focus on education and training for all sectors of the community in order for each of these to effectively carry out their responsibilities in ensuring the safety of food (in close coordination with DOH-BFAD, DOST, DTI, DepEd, DILG, DA)

Challenges in Implementing Food Safety Program in the Country

The increasing concern for food safety is undeniable. Food-borne outbreaks involving agents such as *Escherichia coli*, *Salmonella* and chemical contaminants like formaldehyde and melamine highlights the problem with food safety. BFAD recognizes these but the agency is faced with challenges that when addressed, can enhance food safety measures in the country. Based from the foregoing discussions, the following gaps have been identified:

- Decreasing number of human resources
- Insufficient infrastructure and laboratory services
- Insufficient source of reliable information on Food Safety for Consumers
- Lack of coordination among the different agencies involved in the Food Safety Program
- Lack of food standard development division in BFAD

Policy Direction

To address these gaps, it becomes relevant for BFAD to strengthen its role and function. Using the House Bill No. 3293 as a work in progress document for their proposed amendment, they recommended adequate flexibility to BFAD in terms of budgetary requirements which will be beneficial considering that these could take a structure and system that is time and situation responsive – that is the income retention principle. The issues on the need for regulatory visibility across major economic and health hubs in the country and the need for human capital expansion are envisaged to be addressed. Part of the proposal is also restructuring the bureau / administration which will be product-based and therefore doctrines, standards and enforcement are closely linked together and are more rationally focused insofar as resource allocation. This policy can also address the need to augment the lacking human resources in the bureau / administration.

The second but very important mandate of BFAD, per RA 7394, is the establishment of standards that is based on scientific principles to fulfill the objective of consumer health protection and fair practices in food trade. These standards will guide the industry on specific requirement that would make their product safe and of good quality. These will also guide the FDRO evaluators in the assessment of the product, guide the inspectorate on what to monitor in the establishments because these standards also include recommended codes of practice, and guide

our laboratory on what analysis must be conducted. A unit in the BFAD must be identified to address World Trade Organization (WTO) concerns and Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) concerns including research and data gathering when it comes to prioritization of identified need for technical food regulations.

The Memorandum of Agreement entered with the Industrial Technology Development Institute – Department of Science and Technology (ITDI-DOST) and BFAD in 1993 must be renewed for the assistance in the research in the development of these standards.

Thus, creation of a research and development unit is also crucial in strengthening the food regulations of the Bureau. This must be manned by technical experts in food microbiology, food processing, health and nutrition claims, and food standards. They will coordinate with other agencies and the academe on standards development.

Additional strengthening measure that was set forward by BFAD is the establishment of Memorandum of Agreements with agencies like Bureau of Customs and the development of joint administrative order with the National Meat Inspection Service (NMIS), as well as, strong partnership with the LGUs. This will promote greater ties between inter-agency networks and recognize definitive roles of each to meet their desired objectives.

With regard to the effort in harmonizing the national coordinated food safety program, an executive order was drafted. The document is still being reviewed but it proposes the creation of a Coordinating Committee on Food Safety (CCFS) that will effectively coordinate efforts from various agencies of the government, international organizations and private sector. In the current draft, CCFS will be composed of the following: Department of Science and Technology Secretary as the Chair and Department of Health Secretary as Co-Chair and Secretaries from Department of Agriculture, Trade and Industry, Interior and Local Government will serve as members. Included also as members are the Chair of the National CODEX Committee and representatives from the academe and private sector (food industry).

BFAD also sees the potential of the Department of Education (DepEd) as source of reliable information on food safety especially when this information is made available in schools. Thus, inclusion of DepEd in CCFS is highly relevant. The National Epidemiology Center and National Center for Disease Prevention and Control of the DOH are also reliable sources of information and studies on food- and water-borne-related diseases or outbreaks.

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Draft of Executive Order Creating a Committee on Food Safety (CCFS)

Draft of Joint Administrative Order of Department of Agriculture and Department of Health on Shared Responsibilities and Delineation of Functions and Regulations of Meat Products

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