Preparation is Key for Safer Food: Food Incident Forum 2024 Insights

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The Food Incident Forum (FIF), held on 12 September 2024 in Sydney, brought together peak industry bodies, jurisdictional food regulators, retailers and Commonwealth departments to discuss strengthening responses to food safety incidents across Australia.

I attended the meeting on behalf of Berries Australia, with the forum hosted by Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) and the NSW Food Authority. The workshop aimed to enhance coordination, improve risk management, and ensure consumer safety across the food supply chain.

Key discussions covered recent food safety incidents, rapid response strategies, and effective communication channels, focusing on building a unified, robust response system. Presentations addressed challenges like the cost-of-living crisis, increased business expenses, supply chain disruptions, climate change, and regulatory shifts. Updates on foodborne pathogens, recent outbreaks, and new technologies, such as the FIF GovTEAMS platform and AI-based horizon scanning, were highlighted.

Horizon scanning is a relatively new concept which uses advanced data analysis to predict future trends, helping policymakers make proactive decisions.

A structured approach for industry involvement in government-led incident responses was introduced, including the idea of an industry liaison officer and joint incident debriefing processes. Updates were shared on food tampering guidance, ongoing Listeria outbreak investigations, and issues related to unapproved "mushroom gummies" containing novel psychoactive ingredients.

The cost-of-living crisis has also pressured vulnerable groups to adopt risky food practices, increasing foodborne illness risks. A recent survey found that many Australians consume expired or spoiled food due to financial hardship. The economic crisis has affected customer behaviour towards retail staff and has increased issues such as product loss, tampering claims, food fraud, and manufacturing challenges.

A coordinated approach to food safety, as fostered by the FIF, is essential for efficiently managing risks across the supply chain. Working together, government agencies, regulators, industry leaders, and researchers can respond rapidly to food safety incidents. This approach promotes effective information-sharing, helping to prevent the spread of unsafe food, safeguard public health, and maintain consumer confidence. Coordinated strategies also support the development of best practices and standardised responses, making it easier to prevent and manage future incidents.

In 2022, an exercise tested Australia's food safety response protocols, involving federal, state, and territory authorities and industry representatives. The simulation examined coordination, communication, and rapid response abilities for a hypothetical food crisis, reinforcing the importance of effective data-sharing and joint decision-making.

The berry industry, particularly vulnerable to food safety challenges, benefits from proactive involvement in forums like the FIF. Representing berry producers, Berries Australia works with regulators to set best practices, stay updated on emerging risks, and strengthen incident response capabilities. Such collaboration supports consistent safety standards and maintains consumer trust in Australian berries, both locally and internationally.

As food safety-related recalls increase, individual berry businesses must have transparent crisis management plans. An effective response plan can significantly impact a business's reputation and success. Clear preparation enables businesses to respond swiftly, safeguard financial stability, and ensure continuous customer service. These plans help manage disruptions, whether from natural disasters, transportation issues, system failures, or food safety challenges, allowing businesses to recover efficiently from unforeseen events.

Resources to help you develop a recall plan

One of the main ways individual businesses can be prepared to deal with a food incident is to have a recall plan that ensures they can respond to quickly if an incident occurs.

A recall plan should include the following key components:

- **Clear Roles and Responsibilities:** Identify the recall team, assigning specific roles for decision-making, communication, and recall coordination.
- **Product Traceability and Record-Keeping:** Implement a system for tracking products throughout the supply chain to quickly identify affected batches and minimise recall scope.
- **Risk Assessment and Recall Classification:** Outline procedures to assess the severity of the issue and classify the recall level, ensuring an appropriate response.
- **Communication Protocols:** Develop communication strategies for notifying regulatory bodies, suppliers, customers, and the public, ensuring transparent and timely information.
- **Recall Effectiveness Checks and Post-Recall Review:** Set up a process to verify the recall's effectiveness, document findings, and conduct a post-recall analysis to improve future response efforts.

FSANZ has developed a simple recall plan template to help food businesses develop their own which can be found at https://www.foodstandards.gov.au/sites/default/files/business/food-recalls/recalltemplates/Documents/Food%20Recall%20Plan%20Template%20final.docx

For more information, visit the food recalls webpages at https://www.foodstandards.gov.au/food-recalls or see the Food Industry Recall Protocol at https://www.foodstandards.gov.au/food-recalls/firp.

Freshcare Food Safety & Quality 4.2 requires participants to have an incident management plan that is fully documented, and a test of the incident management plan must be conducted at least annually with a record kept. The incident management plan should be tested using different incidents/scenarios each time to aid in identifying any updates that may be required of the plan.

Business.gov.au provides a good emergency management plan template to help you and your business get prepared for unexpected disruptions: https://business.gov.au/planning/business-plans/develop-an-emergency-management-plan

Guidelines for Fresh Produce Food Safety (2022) has a Chapter 17 Product identification, traceability and recall, page 84 which provides useful additional information for fresh produce businesses. Download this guide at https://fpsc-anz.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/FPSC-Food-Safety-Guidelines-2022.pdf