The Codex Committee on Food Import and Export Inspection and Certification Systems (CCFICS)

The FAO/WHO Conference on Food Standards, Chemicals in Food and Food Trade which met in Rome during 1991 recognized the importance of reliable food inspection and certification and recommended to the Codex Commission that it establish a Committee on Food Import and Export Inspection and Certification Systems (CCFICS).

The first meeting of the CCFICS took place in 1992 to provide practical guidelines to countries on harmonization of inspection and certification principles to lay a foundation for trust between trading partners to enhance world trade and improve human health and hygiene. With the specific requirements of the SPS [www] and TBT [www] Agreements, the importance of the work of this Committee is underscored since there is a need to provide uniform guidelines for inspection and certification systems to assist member countries to re-organise their food control systems where necessary in order to respect their WTO [www] obligations.

Terms of Reference of the Committee:

The terms of reference of the Codex Committee on Food Import and Export Inspection and Certification Systems are:

a. To develop principles and guidelines for food import and export inspection and certification systems with a view to harmonizing methods and procedures which protect the health of consumers, ensure fair trading practices and facilitate international trade in foodstuffs;
b. To develop principles and guidelines for the application of measures by the competent authorities of exporting and importing countries to provide assurance where necessary that foodstuffs comply with requirements, especially statutory health requirements;
c. To develop guidelines for the utilization, as and when appropriate, of quality assurance systems to ensure that foodstuffs conform with requirements and to promote the recognition of these systems in facilitating trade in food products under bilateral/multilateral arrangements by countries;
d. To develop guidelines and criteria with respect to format, declarations and language of such official certificates as countries may require with a view towards international harmonization;
e. To make recommendations for information exchange in relation to food import/export control;
f. To consult as necessary with other international groups working on matters related to food inspection and certification systems; and
g. To consider other matters assigned to it by the Commission in relation to food inspection and certification systems.

Systematically the Committee is considering each of the most important elements of food control programmes with a view to proposing guidelines that, if followed by countries, will lead to eventual harmonization of food control
procedures which will protect the health of consumers and ensure fair practices in the trading of food. This Committee also plays an instrumental role in facilitating the recognition of equivalent Export and Import Food Control measures between trading countries

Codex Guidelines and Principles developed by CCFICS:

The work of CCFICS provides important guidance for food inspection and certification systems and the Codex Alimentarius Commission has adopted the following texts developed by the Committee:

- Guidelines for the Exchange of Information in Food Control Emergency Situations (CAC/GL 19-1995);
- Principles for Food Import and Export Inspection and Certification (CAC/GL 20-1995);
- Guidelines for the Exchange of Information between Countries on Rejections of Imported Food (CAC/GL 25-1997);
- Guidelines for the Design, Operation, Assessment and Accreditation of Food Import and Export Inspection and Certification Systems (CAC/GL 26-1997);
- Guidelines for the Development of Equivalence Agreements Regarding Food Import and Export Inspection and Certification Systems (CAC/GL 34-1999); and
- Guidelines on the judgement of equivalence of sanitary measures associated with food inspection and certification systems (CAC/GL -2003 – finalisation of this Guideline is subject to preparation of additional appendices as of August 2004. See CX/FICS 04/13/3)


“Food control emergency situations” refer to those situations where there is a clearly identified risk of serious untoward health effects associated with the consumption of certain foods. It is in the interest of both importing and exporting countries that the exchange of information in these situations is rapid and the appropriate food control authorities should notify their counterparts in countries where consumers may be at risk through consumption of foods with which an emergency situation has arisen.

Principles for Food Import and Export Inspection and Certification (CAC/GL 20-1995)

Effective food control requires inspection and certification systems to ensure that consumer confidence in the quality of their food is maintained, while at the same time not creating unnecessary impediments for international trade in foodstuffs. The Codex Principles for Food Import and Export Inspection and Certification should be considered and incorporated into the design and use of inspection and certification systems.
The Codex principles are consistent with the concepts contained in the SPS and TBT Agreements. Inspection systems should be designed and based on objective risk assessment and they should be non-discriminatory. The inspection and certification systems must be adequate to achieve their designated objectives having regard to the determination of the acceptable level of protection which is required, but must be no more trade restrictive than necessary. Member countries must seek to harmonise their systems based on Codex Standards, Recommendations and Guidelines and should recognise as equivalent inspection and certification systems of trading partners which, although different, are capable of meeting the same objective. The operations of inspection and certification systems should be open to scrutiny by concerned parties and information on requirements should be readily available on request to ensure transparency of import and export control measures. The principle of special and differential treatment for developing countries is also included.

Guidelines for the Exchange of Information between Countries on Rejections of Imported Foods (CAC/GL 25-1997)

These Guidelines are intended to assist countries to comply with the Principles for Food Import and Export Inspection and Certification, particularly the provisions dealing with transparency. They state the lines of communication that should be followed in case of rejections of imported food under defined situations and also provide and standard format for information exchange.


These guidelines provide a framework for the development of import and export inspection and certification systems consistent with the Principles for Food Import and Export Inspection and Certification. They are intended to assist countries in the application of requirements and the determination of equivalence, thereby protecting consumers and facilitating trade in foodstuffs.

The Guidelines stress the use of the HACCP approach by the food industry to ensure the safety of foodstuffs throughout production, handling and processing stages and the need to encourage the voluntary utilisation of quality assurance systems. The role of governments is to provide the necessary infrastructure to ensure conformity with requirements. The guidelines outline several important principles on the recognition and determination of equivalence and on the establishment of equivalence agreements.


These Guidelines provide practical guidance for countries desiring to enter into bilateral or multilateral equivalence agreements concerning import and export inspection and certification systems.
The purpose of such agreements is to provide greater assurance that exported products conform to importing country requirements; and to facilitate the more efficient and effective use of collective resources. The scope of the agreements can be set according to the needs of the involved trading partners. The Guidelines list a number of issues that may be considered in setting priorities, outlines procedures to be followed in the drafting and implementation of equivalence agreements.

**Guidelines on the judgement of equivalence of sanitary measures associated with food inspection and certification systems (CAC/GL -2003)**

These Guidelines outline the underlying principles underlying the determination of equivalence and then identify main steps in the process of judging the equivalence of sanitary measures associated with food inspection and certification systems.

The Guidelines recognise that an importing country has the right to establish an ‘...appropriate level of sanitary protection (ALOP)’ within its territory. This ALOP then provides the basis of an objective comparison of the sanitary measures in force in the importing and the exporting countries. They should both demonstrate how their own sanitary measures achieve the required ALOP of the importing country, including, as appropriate, information on the scientific basis of the sanitary measures.

**Ongoing and recent work of CCFICS:**

The full text of the Codex Alimentarius publication ‘Food Import and Export Inspection and Certification System - Combined Texts’ is available on the Codex website. Click [here](www) to view this document.

Work continues within this Committee on the development of appendices to the Codex guidelines on the judgement of equivalence of sanitary measures associated with food inspection and certification systems. This Committee is also considering principles for electronic certification and guidelines for risk-based inspection of imported foods.

CCFICS is also working on the elaboration of principles for traceability/product tracing in the context of food inspection and certification systems.

Up-to-date information on discussions within the Codex Committee on Food Import and Export Inspection and Certification and the scheduling and agendas for upcoming meeting are available on the [Codex Alimentarius](www) website [www].