Food Ministers protect public health, support industry innovation

The seventh meeting of the Australia and New Zealand Food Regulation Ministerial Council was held in Sydney today, chaired by Christopher Pyne, Parliamentary Secretary to the Australian Government Minister for Health and Ageing.

The Ministerial Council comprises Ministers responsible for food issues in Australia and New Zealand. At the meeting today the Ministerial Council considered a number of policy issues and projects related to food regulation in Australia and New Zealand. These included:

Country of Origin Labelling

The Ministerial Council considered the proposed draft standard for Country of Origin Labelling. The standard will see comprehensive consumer information relating to country of origin labelling on many products sold in Australia. It provides for broader requirements on unpackaged foods and increased requirements for packaged foods.

Arrangements for adopting the standard in Australia require final work to be completed during November. Once adopted, the standard will include a transitional period so that manufacturers can transit from the current system to the new in a measured way. Implementation detail will be made available in the FSANZ website. The application of the standard to New Zealand is yet to be determined.

The issue of country of origin labelling of packed fruit and vegetables, and the Trade Practises Act application of the terms ‘Made in…’ and ‘Product of…’ to food were considered. The Ministerial Council supported the Australian Government proposal to Direct Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) to undertake further work to assess the merit of extending country of origin labelling to two or less fruit or vegetables whole food components packaged together including where other incidental ingredients are included.

Two or less fruit and/or vegetable whole food components packed together include frozen, preserved, dehydrated and packaged product, and juice, with a requirement to identify the actual country of origin of each of the two principal whole food components, including where other incidental components are included, with identical whole food components from different countries being separately identified. The work undertaken should be capable of being expressed as a standard, if agreed to by the Ministerial Council, with minimal delay.
The Australian Government has also written to its Treasurer and Minister for Industry, Tourism and Resources, requesting their consideration on how to address the issues relating to the Trade Practices Act including those arising from the ‘Made in’ and ‘Product of’ claims, with a view to greater clarity about the place of origin of food, rather than the place it is packaged.

**Fortification of Food with Calcium**

The Ministerial Council agreed to permit the addition of calcium to fruit and vegetable juices, drinks, soups and savoury biscuits. Ministers endorsed work currently underway by FSANZ including:
- a review to be implemented over 5 years to assess the impact of voluntary fortification;
- commencing a process to review the Food Standards Code with a view to aligning vitamin and mineral claims into the new health claims standard; and
- a workshop for officials to consider and potentially solve a range of issues relevant to voluntary fortification.


**Review of Food Standards Australia New Zealand Assessment and Approval Process – Protection of Confidential Commercial Information and Timeliness**

The Ministerial Council has largely finalised its review of FSANZ assessment and approval processes. The review also considered options for the appropriate treatment of confidential commercial information.

The Council strongly endorses that the primary objectives of food regulation are to protect public health, provide information for consumer choice, and prevent misleading conduct. However, it is important that processes for developing food standards are efficient, and minimise the regulatory burden on industry.

Ministers have agreed to a number of measures that will assist FSANZ to expedite food standards development and protect commercially valuable information.

In brief, the recommendations relate to:
- prescribing the form of an application, including full substantiation requirements, in order to cut down on the number of times additional information has to be requested from applicants;
- reforming the assessment and consultation processes – so that the complexity and nature of applications and proposals links to the level of consultation required;
- the Ministerial Council – particularly in relation to reducing the number of rounds of reviews, ‘stop the clock’ provisions, and giving ‘directions’ to FSANZ; and
- the protection of commercially valuable information in relation to health claims.

The agreed measures that require legislative change have been referred to the Australian Government Minister for Health and Ageing for further consideration and consultation. FSANZ also supports these changes and has indicated that implementation of administrative changes has already commenced.
The Ministerial Council will get regular updates on the progress towards achieving the implementation of these recommendations, and the effectiveness of the changes in expediting the food regulator’s processes.

**Strategy for Consistent Implementation and Enforcement of Food Regulation**

The Ministerial Council is pleased to announce that it has agreed to a *Strategy for Consistent Implementation and Enforcement of Food Regulation*. A copy of the Strategy will be made available on the Food Regulation Secretariat Website at www.foodregulation.gov.au.

The objective of this strategy is to provide a framework for collaborative work amongst Australian food safety regulators (and New Zealand regulators as appropriate). This will lead to the development of a consistent approach to implementation of food regulations and standards.

**Media contact:** Adam Howard, Media Adviser to Mr Pyne 0400 414 833  
Kay McNiece, Media Liaison to Ministerial Council, 0412 132 585  
or +61 412 132 585 (NZ)