An extraordinary meeting of the Australia and New Zealand Food Regulation Ministerial Council was held in Canberra today, chaired by Senator Brett Mason, 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 Food Standards Australia New Zealand’s (FSANZ) first review report on the draft standard for the mandatory fortification of food with folic acid.

**Mandatory Fortification with Folic Acid**

At their meeting on 4 May 2007, Ministers agreed to meet during June 2007 to consider FSANZ’s findings from the first review of the mandatory fortification of food with folic acid standard required by the Ministerial Council and make a decision on the matter.

Food Ministers today affirmed the draft standard on the mandatory fortification of food with folic acid for inclusion in the *Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code*.

The draft standard requires the mandatory addition of folic acid to wheat flour for bread-making within the prescribed range of 200-300 micrograms per 100 grams of flour. This level of fortification is expected to prevent between 14 and 49 neural tube defects in the 300-350 affected pregnancies in Australia each year when combined with existing voluntary fortification permissions and current levels of supplement usage. In New Zealand, this level of fortification is expected to prevent between 4-14 neural tube defects each year. There is a transition period of two years for the new standard.

Neural tube defects are severe birth defects that are associated with considerable morbidity and mortality as well as hardship for carers and families. Fortifying food with folic acid has been adopted in a number of countries to reduce the prevalence of these birth defects.

In adopting the new standard the Ministerial Council has exempted wheat flour for bread-making represented as organic.
The Ministerial Council recognises the importance of public health and safety in adopting the new standard. An extensive monitoring system is being finalised to determine the effects of mandatory folic acid fortification.

It was also agreed that a comprehensive and independent review of mandatory fortification with folic acid will be initiated two years after implementation of the standard. The review will consider health impacts and the effectiveness of the initiative, the actual cost impacts on the food industry and the adequacy of the monitoring framework.

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