

11th November 2020

Response to FSA / FSS review of 'guidance on the safety and shelf-life of vacuum and modified atmosphere packed chilled foods with respect to non-proteolytic *Clostridium botulinum*' in relation to the shelf-life of chilled fresh beef, lamb and pork.

Dear Food Standards Agency (FSA) and Food Standards Scotland (FSS),

Food businesses are responsible for ensuring that food placed on the market is safe. IFST supports the collaborative development of technical guidance by FSA and FSS with industry to promote best practice and consistency in food safety and food technical regulatory compliance across all sizes and types of food business operations.

IFST welcome and support the active use of technically expert advisory committees to critically review the latest scientific evidence, interpret the impact and implications for food safety and make recommendations as to its application.

With respect to specific comments to inform a review of the guidance in relation to the shelf-life of VP/MAP chilled fresh beef, lamb and pork in the temperature range from 3°C to 8°C where other controls are not applied in respect of the risk of *C. botulinum*, IFST proposes the following points and suggestions be considered:

- In complex areas relating to food safety, technical guidance from FSA/FSS provides useful expert advice for the food sector, in particular for SME food business operators.
- The application of a combination of option 2 and option 3 for risk management would give more security to the industry rather than reliance on option 3 alone. A precautionary maximum shelf-life of 13 days for non-proteolytic *C. botulinum* could be considered as a default option to protect public health, as recommended by the ACMSF. Expert advice should be sought if a shelf life in excess of 13 days is desired. Shelf-life proposed should be justified and supported by scientific evidence per each specific food product as sold to end of shelf life pertinent to the food businesses specific operations, the inherent risks for the foodstuffs concerned, the proposed packaging format, and the intended and foreseeable use of the food by the consumer.
- Should option 3 be considered, IFST recommend that efforts be made to pursue and apply alternatives to requiring use of the *in vivo* mouse bioassay. Botulinum toxin detection using this *in vivo* method is widely recognised as a reliable method. It is however not easy to perform, has ethical issues and not easily available in UK testing laboratories. Evidence of a lack of growth for *C. botulinum* would offer an alternative and precautionary endpoint as a lack of growth would be concomitant with a lack of biotoxin formation.
- FSA/FSS should review the lethal rate table below 90°C, taking into account established industry requirements, and providing further guidance on its application to support food safety.
- Heat is not a necessary controlling factor in all cases, as identified by the ACMSF subgroup. The proposed amendments to guidance would address this point. It could be emphasised that the presence of controlling factors would not obviate the need for challenge testing to evidence shelf life.
- Consumers may notice VP/MAP products placed on the market with significantly different shelf-life, some at 10-13 days and some longer. IFST recommends FSA provides clarity for consumers why this situation arises.

Yours sincerely,

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