Codex working group addresses guideline for foods derived from animal biotechnology

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Summary
At the fifth session of the Codex Ad Hoc Intergovernmental Task Force on Foods Derived from Biotechnology last September, the attending countries agreed to work on an animal biotechnology (recombinant DNA, or r-DNA) project. A working group was formed to develop a guideline for food safety assessment of foods derived from r-DNA animals.

The animal working group held its first meeting Feb. 13-15, 2006, in Tokyo, Japan with 20 countries, the European Community and two international nongovernmental organizations attending. Progress was made on the draft guideline document, however more work is scheduled before the next, full task force meeting in November 2006.

Background
Codex is recognized by the World Trade Organization (WTO) as the food safety standard setting body for facilitating international trade of food products. The WTO cites Codex texts as a benchmark in the Agreement on Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS), making it more important than ever that these international food standards be developed based on sound scientific principles. When Codex standards, codes of practice or guidelines are adopted, they are used by importing countries as a basis for allowing or rejecting products. Without science-based standards, U.S. beef products could be unnecessarily shut out of international markets.

During the September Codex Ad Hoc Intergovernmental Task Force on Foods Derived from Biotechnology, a working group was established to develop a guideline for assessing the safety of foods derived from r-DNA animals (Please see “Codex task force to address animal biotechnology,” in the November/December 2005 Issues Update for more information). The working group, which is co-chaired by Australia and Japan, is using the guidelines previously developed for r-DNA plants and microbes as a template. The guideline must be consistent with the previously adopted Working Principles for Risk Analysis for Application in the Framework of the Codex Alimentarius and the Principles for the Risk Analysis of Foods Derived from Modern Biotechnology.

The first working group meeting, held Feb. 13-15, 2006, was attended by 20 countries, the European Community and two international nongovernmental organizations, BIO (Biotechnology Industry Organization) and Consumers International. The National Cattlemen’s Beef Association (NCBA) participated in this meeting as a beef industry representative and part of the BIO delegation. The purpose of the meeting was to start editing the draft document, “Proposed Draft Guidelines for the Conduct of Food Safety Assessment of Foods Derived from Recombinant-DNA Animals,” circulated prior to the meeting. The working group goal is to present a draft to the task force at the next meeting in November.

The working group spent three days going through the draft document paragraph by paragraph. This tedious activity was necessary for identifying potential issues and edits to be discussed by the entire working group. About half of the document was agreed to by the working group. The other half was either not agreed upon or not discussed due to time constraints. Some of the important areas that need further discussion due to no agreement include: what is excluded from the document (animal welfare, ethics and the environment) and the role of the health status of the animal in a food safety assessment.

Another working group meeting will be held in early summer to finish the first round of discussions on the draft guideline. The document will then be discussed at the full task force meeting in November 2006. While things seem to be progressing with the draft guideline, the entire process will likely take two to three years to complete.
Key Points

• In February, the working group charged with developing a guideline for assessing the safety of foods derived from r-DNA animals met for the first time. The working group was formed during the last Codex Ad Hoc Intergovernmental Task Force on Foods Derived from Biotechnology session in September.

• This recombinant-DNA animal project has the opportunity to provide science-based guidelines for countries to use when conducting a safety assessment of the products from these animals. Ultimately, it could facilitate international trade when these products become available.

• The working group reviewed a proposed draft guideline during the February meeting and will meet again in May or June to finish this first round of discussion. The goal is to have a draft to present to the full task force at its November 2006 meeting.

• It is important to the livestock, food and biotechnology industries that the draft document remains science-based, focused on food safety and does not include areas not under the jurisdiction of Codex like animal welfare, ethics or the environment.