

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

Food supply networks: integrity and assurance review

Note of meeting with Liz Moran

Location: Association of Public Analysts Conference, Liverpool

Date: 23 October 2013

Attendees:

Rebecca Kenner (RK) – Assistant Secretary - Review into the Integrity and Assurance of Food Supply Networks

Liz Moran (LM) - President of the Association of Public Analysts

Michael Walker (MW) – Subject Matter Expert - Review into the Integrity and Assurance of Food Supply Networks

1. Introduction

MW gave a short overview of the Review; Chris Elliott was commissioned to undertake a review of the food supply chain, not just red meat, by the SoS for Defra and Department of Health. Chris has asked Michael to consider the food testing regime and lab capacity in England.

2. How did Official Control Laboratories cope during the horsemeat incident?

LM felt that the OCL system had coped during the horsemeat incident, but not because the lab infrastructure is necessarily set up to cope. Instead it coped because individual labs and analysts were willing to go the extra mile, working around the clock to process samples and putting other work on hold. Working at that intensity could not have been sustained for any length of time, so system would not have coped had the crisis lasted longer.

Only 6 of the 14 labs in the UK (counting Public Analyst Scientific Services as a single lab) were able to undertake DNA analysis, the rest had to send their samples to other labs. Manufacturers and retailers were looking for quick tests for industry to use that could be replicated on a large-scale; there was a significant gap in the market for cheap speciation tests.

3. How is the Official Control Laboratory system coping more generally?

In LM's view, the current OCL model is not fit for purpose. This is largely because the Local Authority delivery model is not an efficient way of delivering a laboratory service; market forces are making food testing less local out of necessity.

LM referred to Food Authorities (some 280 in UK) as opposed to Local Authorities and in general the Food Authorities lack the capacity or resources to undertake effective enforcement against large food companies or retailers and the UK Food Surveillance System is not being used nationally, so there is a risk of duplication in sampling budgets as there is no central co-ordination of testing. The lab network of hygiene testing is centrally funded and co-ordinated, so why not have centrally co-ordinated chemical testing?

4. How could the OCL system be improved?

LM felt that the best way of improving the OCL system would be to create a centrally funded and co-ordinated system of laboratories, although she accepts that this isn't likely in the current climate due to national and local authority politics, among other things. If there were a centrally funded lab system, there would no longer be a need for a fee per sample, as there is now. Instead the cost would be building, staffing and running the lab. Although any Government funded lab would likely have to be subsidised financially.

The way the system is running at present, it is likely that public analyst services will eventually be provided solely by private ventures; LA's are not obliged to provide labs, so as budgets get tighter they are having to be closed. The resources for publicly-funded labs have been cut so that many are now too small, with too few staff, to make them economical as their equipment and testing overheads are too high. They are also unable to invest in new technology and keep up to date with modern testing requirements. Private labs often specialise in a specific type of testing and will undertake a large quantity of that testing in order to benefit from economies of scale – small, publicly-owned labs cannot compete with them.

The advantages of a wholly private system would be that the cost of analysis would be brought down and the overall analytical offering would be better. However, this situation would also mean that the authorities would have no control over what testing the private sector is offering, so some analysis which is not commercially viable, could be lost. Some one-off tests, e.g. investigatory analysis might not be offered. Public analyst labs are getting an increasing number of food business referrals from Local Authorities who are no longer willing to pay for the businesses to have their products tested.

However, LM agrees that with a private system, there is a possibility of losing the public sector ethos, which would need to be carefully considered, although believes that the qualifications and attributes of a Public Analyst do offset any potential deficiencies (e.g. requirement to make a profit) of the private sector, to some extent.

Merging labs

LM agrees that the merging of publicly-funded lab systems would mean that those labs could become more capable of deploying economies of scale and resilience. However,

having a single national system would remove the competitive element, so if LAs didn't like the service they were getting from a single national laboratory service they may no longer have the choice to go elsewhere.

In terms of merging, a merge with Public Health England would be the obvious choice as they are also testing local authority food enforcement samples. However, there is also the issue that if local authorities close their labs they may also cut their sampling budgets e.g. when two local authority labs were recently closed, the authorities' sampling budgets were halved the following year. As publicly-funded labs continue to cut resources, there is also the danger of these labs being left with only one qualified PA, which leaves them in a vulnerable position.

Action: RK and MW to consider visiting Public Analyst labs.

25 November 2013