

HM Government

Review into the Integrity and Assurance of Food Supply Networks

Note of follow-up meeting with Food Forensics

Location: Teleconference from Defra, Nobel House, London

Date: 6 December 2013

Attendees:

Alison Johnson – Managing Director, Food Forensics

Professor Chris Elliott – Independent Reviewer – Review into the Integrity and Assurance of Food Supply Networks

David Foot – Assistant Secretary - Review into the Integrity and Assurance of Food Supply Networks

1. Introduction

Professor Elliott (CE) welcomed the opportunity to discuss the more technical aspects of Food Forensics' work in the light of their earlier discussions with the Secretariat. CE noted that Food Forensics appeared to be the only company which had specialised in authenticity.

2. Discussion

Alison Johnson (AJ) said that she and John Hughes, Director, Food Forensics had been aware of issues in the red meat industry which had drawn them into wider authenticity activity and the setting up of Food Forensics. Her perception was that food fraud was little understood within the industry and she had been surprised at how broad the fraud opportunities were in a wide range of food products. The assumption had been that most fraud would be in protein related products, but it was everywhere. All the foods Food Forensics had looked at had a fraud aspect. CE agreed that the problem was widespread. The food industry provided easy opportunities for fraudulent activity because, among other things, industry made few checks of products to verify authenticity and supply chains were often complex. AJ felt that food fraud helped to underpin profits within the industry. The attitude appeared to be 'cheat or die' because competition was so fierce and some companies traded at the lowest possible standards. Reputable companies found themselves losing out to companies who acted fraudulently, often in order to retain contracts where they could not supply the products at the agreed price.

AJ explained that that Food Forensics' work covered both authenticating country of origin and production methods. The company could also help businesses target their testing better on what products to test and when. Testing could act as a deterrent as criminals would not know what was being tested and when. CE agreed that surveillance was much more effective if it could be targeted. AJ said that it appeared that in general the industry

was not keen on a proactive testing approach and were reluctant to provide the necessary funding. Her concern was that the level of engagement by leading retailers varied widely, even when provided with evidence of adulteration and substitution. They placed too much emphasis on the 'one up, one down' approach to assuring the integrity of their supply chains. CE said that a good outcome from the review would be to end the reliance by industry on paper-work to demonstrate they had proper control over their supply chains.

AJ said that Food Forensics had been setting up its database for about 18 months but had only been offering a service for around 6 months. The database underpinned the work to protect the UK brand, i.e. to confirm a product was not from the UK rather than proving where it had been produced. Food Forensics had been producing isotope maps to help demonstrate where the product might have come from. But it would take time to produce more robust models – although for some high risk products e.g. olive oil, good progress had already been made. AJ stressed the importance of the integrity of the sample collection. Collection of genuine samples for establishing and maintaining a database was absolutely imperative. If this was not protected then the discrimination potential of the method is eroded. If there was a risk with this technology it was with the establishment of the base datasets. CE noted that the problem was that a robust database required the analysis of a significant number of samples. AJ said that the information provided to clients would enable them to better focus their auditing and to potentially reduce their audit costs. But AJ acknowledged that the isotope test had limitations. It provided an indication of non-compliance but the evidence would not be robust enough to prove the origin of a product in the courts.

CE and AJ discussed the more technical aspects of Food Forensics' equipment and analytical methods.

3. Conclusion

CE said that he would be publishing his interim report in mid-December. A key finding would be that there was a lack of knowledge about the extent of food fraud which needed to be filled. He was considering whether to put out invitation to stakeholders who had done work on authenticity to feedback data they might have collected in order to get a clearer picture. He would only expect anonymised data to help define the scale of the problem. AJ said that she would consider what high level information Food Forensics might be able to share without compromising client confidentiality.

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