

“Dented cans, damaged packaging and spoiled goods not only pose a major threat to consumers’ safety – it also scathes the retail industry’s image. Consumers often fall prey to a false sense of security when it comes to the food they buy”

How safe is the **food you eat?**

by *Karien Slabbert*



The Consumer Goods Council of South Africa (CGCSA) is convinced that food safety and the management of food production, should be left to the food industry. It believes that the country's buying power has an important role to play in promoting food safety and risk management.

According to the CCGSA, the general public assumes that products are carefully selected, ingredients are monitored and quality-controlled, proper quality assurance systems are in place during processing or production, and defective items will be rejected. While this is true in many cases, there are instances where less-than-scrupulous operators do not follow basic food safety rules.

The East London-based newspaper, *Daily Dispatch*, earlier reported that Spar had warned its store owners in the Eastern Cape that a certain supplier had sold food after tampering with the expiry dates. The scam concerning the re-labelling of food that had passed its "sell-by" date, resulted in a spurge of media coverage on food safety.

The negative publicity presented the Spar retail group with a predicament. Spar marketing director, Roelf Venter, told *Business Day* that all Spar stores are owner-managed. He said that this could pose a challenge to the group and to the protection of its brand name. The relevant store owner is under investigation, but claims that he was sold merchandise that the supplier had tampered with and that he had no knowledge of the scam. Venter said the group was attempting to educate store owners about expiry dates.

The CGCSA expressed its concern over the East London incident. Its recently-formed Food Safety Initiative (FSI) encourages retailers to inspect foodstuffs on receipt "to determine their country of origin and batch identification, as well as to identify signs of possible tampering".

"In the absence of food labelling regulations, many manufacturers and some retailers use the 'best before' and 'use by' dates for consumer convenience and information," states Prof Lucia Anelich, manager of the FSI. "Sell-by" dates are often added. Unscrupulous distributors are changing the 'sell-by' or 'best before' or 'use by' dates on food products."

A consumer perspective

According to Anelich, South Africa has no national food safety policy: "What we do have is a fragmented regulatory framework, considerable overlapping of functions between different government departments dealing with food safety, as well as an alarming lack of capacity in those departments." However, Anelich does point out that South Africa generally has a very responsible food manufacturing sector. The sector has always laid emphasis on self-regulation.

Getting involved

According to the CGCSA, consumers consider it a basic right to purchase food they can rely on – without even thinking about it: "When a problem arises, South Africans tend to be apathetic, shrug and throw the product away. When they do complain, they happily accept reimbursement or a replacement product."

Consumers should become more involved in food safety issues, the Council says. For example, consumers should always check the packaging on frozen goods for signs of thawing. They should note the 'sell-by' date and ensure that the freezers containing frozen goods don't have leaks or indications of melting ice.

The Food Advisory Consumer Service (FACS) agrees, stating that government cannot protect consumers from the consequences of their own actions. Consumers should also be encouraged to practice the necessary safety requirements when handling, preparing and storing food.

Common-sense practices

Consumers can implement a set of common-sense practices to ensure that when they do buy products, they retain their quality. Consumer should be aware of risks, says the Consumer Goods Council: "Keep an eye out for the extensive consumer education campaigns that big brands regularly undertake, and stay informed. You can make a positive impact on improving food safety in your local industry."

The Council gives the following tips:

- Leave frozen and chilled purchases until last when shopping
- Do not leave frozen or chilled goods in a parked car. Preferably pack them in insulated bags or in containers with ice packs for the journey home

- Store frozen/chilled and raw goods separately
- Do not keep frozen or chilled goods for longer than indicated
- Follow the cooking instructions on the packaging
- Keep an eye open for the hygiene conditions where you shop.

Food safety regulations

According to the FACS, access to safe and affordable food is a basic human right. Consumers expect and deserve protection against risks found in food and therefore appropriate regulatory systems are important. The National Departments of Agriculture, Health and Trade and Industry are the main parties responsible for food legislation.

The Department of Agriculture regulates safety and quality of agriculture and animal products in terms of the Agricultural Product Standards Act, 1990. The Department of Health requires that all foodstuffs must be safe for human consumption in terms of the Foodstuffs, Cosmetics and Disinfectant Act, 1972 (FCD Act). Matters regarding the hygiene of foodstuffs, are addressed by the National Health Act, 2003, while the hygiene requirements at ports and airports are addressed by the International Health Regulations Act, 1974. The South African Bureau of Standards (SABS) falls under the jurisdiction of the Department of Trade and Industry and controls canned meat and frozen and canned fishery products through the Standards Act, 1993.

Contaminants and toxins in food

The FACS says on its website that food legislation is based on the presumption of safety: "Where a substance is not naturally present in a food, such as an additive or contaminant, maximum limits are laid down which in many cases are those determined by *Codex Alimentarius*."

The FCD Act is considered to be a reactive Act which means that approved and acceptable sources are taken in to account to provide the information on safety of foodstuffs for regulatory purposes. These sources are pro-active,

which means that government approval must be obtained for the release of a product on the market. Assessments are required of the data and information submitted by the applicant to determine the risk. These assessments are conducted by a group of independent experts or government officials trained to do so.

What is the *Codex Alimentarius*?

The *Codex Alimentarius* Commission was created in 1963 by the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and the World Health Organisation (WHO) to develop International food standards, guidelines and related texts such as codes of practice under the Joint FAO/WHO Food Standards Programme.

South Africa is a member of Codex and the contact point is the Department of Health. Government officials represent the country at committee meetings where standards are developed on a consensus base. It is the aim of the South African Department of Health to give effect to Codex standards in South African legislation.

Consumer watchdogs

- **FACS** – This is South Africa's first independent food and nutrition consumer service. Its purpose is to provide consumers with information on food and nutrition issues which is both relevant and scientifically correct. The FACS operates a telephone service from an office in Pretoria. The service is supported by a network of technical experts in food, nutrition and related subjects.
- **FSI** – The Initiative was launched in February 2006, under the auspices of the CGCSA. It came about through a number of factors that led stakeholders in the food industry to realise the need to create an independent, objective body that could provide sound scientific advice on all food safety-related matters. The FSI aims to provide a proactive service to the broader food industry and all its stakeholders to ensure the continuous production, sale and consumption of safe and nutritious foods.

Central database

The FSI is creating a central knowledge database to provide essential information on food safety issues to all stakeholders. The first phase will embrace South Africa and foods consumed by South Africans, locally produced and imported, as well as food services. Phase two will expand to the South African Development Community and will include foods for export.

The initiative will consider all food safety aspects. This includes cold chain transport, biological and chemical hazards, genetically modified organisms, packaging, food additives, allergens, food hygiene and food safety management systems.

According to the FSI, the site should be up and running by 31 October 2006, the scheduled launch date. "We aim for it to be a one-stop-shop on all issues regarding food safety, with links to other relevant sites in South Africa and elsewhere," says Anelich.



International trends

In Europe and the United States, a food scare of any kind, no matter how apparently limited and insignificant, is reported to the relevant authorities by law. It is then dealt with accordingly, resulting in no action (as appropriate), voluntary withdrawal or compulsory recall of products from supermarket shelves.

Investigations into the source of the problem is instantly implemented with subsequent upgrading of risk management systems to improve food safety. Companies undertake intensive public relations and marketing campaigns to restore their reputation.

Additional information can be obtained on www.bizcommunity.com **M&J**



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