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Questions and Answers: Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed @ 35 (RASFF)

What is RASFF?

Launched 35 years ago, in 1979, the Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed (RASFF) is primarily an IT tool designed to swiftly exchange information between national authorities on health risks related to food and feed. A Member country that identifies such a health hazard informs the rest of the RASFF network of the product concerned and on what measures have been taken. Measures include: withholding, recalling, seizing or rejecting products. This rapid exchange of information allows all RASFF members, in real time, to check whether they are also affected and if urgent action is needed. Member States' authorities have the power to take an array of emergency measures, including giving direct information to the public and withdrawing products from the market.

Who are the members of RASFF?

The RASFF network includes: all 28 EU Member States (from 1 July 2013, Croatia became a member of the RASFF), EEA countries (Norway, Liechtenstein and Iceland), the EFTA Secretariat coordinating the input from the EEA countries, the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) and the European Commission as manager of the system. Following an agreement that came into force on 1 January 2009, Switzerland is a partial member of the system as far as border rejections of product of animal origin are concerned.

Why do we need RASFF?

RASFF underpins the swift exchange of information among public health authorities on food and feed related risks. This tool enables all RASFF members to take coordinated, coherent and simultaneous actions. The objective is to ensure the highest possible level of consumer protection. Thanks to the work carried out through RASFF measures to prevent, reduce or eliminate the public health risk can be taken.

How does it work in practice?

First the problem is notified by the member of the RASFF network holding the information on the existence of a serious, direct or indirect, risk to public health linked to food or feed. This information is immediately notified to the Commission through RASFF, which in turn immediately transmits the information to the other members of the network.

Member States use a common template to provide all relevant and useful information including:

- identification of the product,

- hazards found,
- measures taken and
- information on tracing the product.

Upon receiving the information, other Member States will check to see if they are concerned. If the product is on their market they will be able to trace it using the information in the notification. They will report back on what they have found and what measures they have taken. In case of products produced in the EU, the Member State where the product originates will also report on the outcome of its investigations into the origin, distribution and cause of the problem identified. This allows other Member States to take rapid action if needed.

What are the criteria for sending a notification?

Member States must immediately notify the Commission via RASFF when they have information regarding a serious health risk deriving from food or feed. The specific criteria triggering a notification are set out in the legislation¹.

What is the Commission doing to mark its 35th anniversary?

2014 marks 35 years since the first RASFF notification was sent. The Commission has been the driver for developing the system since then. This year is an important milestone in the development of the system since two important features have been implemented: i-RASFF and the RASFF consumer portal.

What is iRASFF?

iRASFF is the new online application through which all 32 RASFF member countries can transmit new notifications about products presenting a risk or provide follow-up to previously transmitted notifications by other members. It functions like an online interactive platform and has a specific workflow to allow members of the network to collaborate on the notifications in a transparent way. It is designed to function both at national and EU level. This new feature will bring other benefits in that it will link RASFF notifications to other systems such as the Trade and Control System (TRACES) for veterinary health and the future food fraud IT system more efficiently.

What is the new RASFF consumers' portal and what does it do?

Launched on 13 June, the new RASFF consumers' portal provides practical and timely information drawn from the RASFF on consumer recall notices and public warnings issued by food safety authorities and business operators. It supplements information made public on the RASFF notifications – which is actually only a small portion of the information transmitted in the network.

What are the main findings of the RASFF annual report 2013?

The overall number of notifications transmitted through RASFF in 2013 compared to 2012 decreased by 9%.

2013 saw a focus on "food fraud" as a result of the horsemeat scandal. Although, RASFF is primarily a platform to exchange information on food safety issues and not intended for cross-border administrative cooperation in cases of food fraud, the Commission decided to use the RASFF system to notify the cases that broke in Ireland and the UK. The reason for

¹ Article 50 of Regulation (EC) No 178/2002, OJ L 60, 1.3.2002, p. 70-80

this was that RASFF features allow for the collection and reporting of information that was key to tracing back mislabelled goods. A dedicated tool for cross-border cooperation in food fraud cases is being established.

Reinforcing Europe's ability to fight food fraud will help strengthen our systems that ensure food safety. There are however, other new and emerging challenges to be addressed including sales of food supplements on the internet, and foodborne outbreaks or food contamination with previously unknown or uncommon pathogens. This report also highlights hepatitis A outbreaks due to berry mixes used as ingredients in smoothies or cakes and contamination of meat with toxin-producing *E. coli*.

What is covered by the top notifications?

The tables below group notifications by hazard reported and product category in which this hazard was found, by country of origin (first table) and by notifying country (second table). For example: item one on the first table shows that aflatoxins found in nuts or nut products from Turkey is the most notified issue. The countries affected are also listed as well as the actions taken in relation to the 61 individual findings of aflatoxins in the identified product category.

Top 10 notifications counted for each combination of hazard/product category/country of origin

	hazard	product category	origin	notifi-cations	countries affected ²	action taken ³
1	Aflatoxins	nuts, nut products and seeds	Turkey	61	Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Syria, Turkey, United Kingdom, United States	Destruction, detained by operator, import not authorised, informing recipients, official detention, placed under customs seals, re-dispatch, return to consignor, seizure, withdrawal from the market.
2	Migration of chromium	food contact materials	China	59	Bulgaria, China, Croatia, Faeroe Islands, Finland, Iceland, Italy, Lithuania, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Serbia, South Africa	Destruction, import not authorised, informing authorities, official detention, placed under customs seals, re-dispatch, return to consignor, withdrawal from the market.
3	Aflatoxins	nuts, nut products and seeds	China	54	China, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Malta, Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Spain, United Kingdom	Detained by operator, import not authorised, official detention, physical/chemical treatment, placed under customs seals, recall from consumers, re-dispatch, return to

² Countries in which the product was manufactured, placed on the market, traded or transited.

³ This is not an exhaustive or definitive list of measures taken in relation to these notifications but are the initial measures reported by the notifying countries.

						consignor, use in feed, withdrawal from the market.
4	Mercury	fish and fish products	Spain	43	Austria, China, France, Germany, Greece, India, Indonesia, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Singapore, Slovenia, Spain, Vietnam	destruction, detained by operator, informing authorities, informing recipients, official detention, re-dispatch, withdrawal from the market.
5	Aflatoxins	fruits and vegetables	Turkey	39	Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Malta, Netherlands, Romania, Slovakia, Spain, Tunisia, Turkey, United Kingdom	Destruction, detained by operator, import not authorised, informing authorities, official detention, placed under customs seals, recall from consumers, re-dispatch, return to consignor, withdrawal from the market.
6	Migration of manganese	food contact materials	China	38	China, Italy	Destruction, import not authorised, official detention, placed under customs seals, re-dispatch, return to consignor
7	Salmonella spp.	poultry meat and poultry meat products	Brazil	31	Brazil, Bulgaria, Italy, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, United Kingdom	Destruction, import not authorised, physical/chemical treatment, re-dispatch, return to consignor.
8	Carbon monoxide treatment	fish and fish products	Spain	30	Italy, Senegal, Spain	Destruction, informing authorities, informing recipients, physical/chemical treatment, recall from consumers, return to consignor, seizure, withdrawal from the market.
9	Salmonella Heidelberg	poultry meat and	Brazil	29	Brazil, Bulgaria, Denmark, Italy,	Destruction, detained by operator, import not authorised, informing

		poultry meat products			Netherlands, Spain, Switzerland	authorities, official detention, re-dispatch.
10	Salmonella enteritidis	poultry meat and poultry meat products	Poland	28	Belgium, Bulgaria, Commission Services, Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Germany, Italy, Monaco, Netherlands, Poland, Slovakia, Spain, United Kingdom	Destruction, informing authorities, informing recipients, official detention, recall from consumers, use for other purpose than food/feed, use in feed, withdrawal from the market.

Top 10 notifications counted for each combination of hazard/product category/notifying country

	hazard	product category	notifying country	notifications
1	Migration of chromium	food contact materials	Italy	59
2	aflatoxins	nuts, nut products and seeds	Germany	50
3	mercury	fish and fish products	Italy	49
4	Migration of manganese	food contact materials	Italy	48
5	aflatoxins	nuts, nut products and seeds	The Netherlands	42
6	Migration of nickel	food contact materials	Italy	41
7	Shigatoxin-producing Escherichia coli (STEC)	meat and meat products (other than poultry)	The Netherlands	40
8	Salmonella spp.	fruits and vegetables	United Kingdom	34
9	Carbon monoxide treatment	fish and fish products	Italy	32
10	Aflatoxins	nuts, nut products and seeds	Italy	27

What is the starting point of a RASFF notification?

RASFF notifications are triggered for a variety of reasons. A majority of notifications concern controls at the outer EEA borders⁴, at points of entry or border inspection posts when the consignment was not accepted for import ("border control – consignment detained"). In some cases, a sample was taken for analysis at the border (screening) and the consignment was released ("border control - consignment released"). The second largest category of notifications concerns official controls on the internal market⁵. Three special types of notifications are identified: a consumer complaint, a company notifying the outcome of an own-check, or a food poisoning as the basis of the notification.

Who has what powers to take action when a problem is detected?

When a problem is detected, it is the task of the national food and feed authorities to take the necessary action. This includes any action necessary to immediately eliminate the risk but also to prevent a similar risk reoccurring. A whole range of actions are carried out and reported back through RASFF: withdrawal or recall of the products and their possible destruction, information to the public, re-dispatch to origin etc. If there is a need for emergency (safeguard) measures at EU level, the Commission and EU Member States can decide on these measures using a rapid procedure. Such measures are binding with immediate effect on all Member States.

⁴ Since 2009 Switzerland is included.

⁵ Products placed on the market in one of the member countries including the EEA countries Norway, Liechtenstein and Iceland.