ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON THE MICROBIOLOGICAL SAFETY OF FOOD

GUIDANCE ON THE SAFETY AND SHELF-LIFE OF VACUUM AND MODIFIED ATMOSPHERE PACKED CHILLED FOODS WITH RESPECT TO NON-PROTEOLYTIC *CLOSTRIDIUM BOTULINUM*

This paper relates to the publication of the attached guidance document covering food safety aspects of the manufacture of vacuum and modified atmosphere packaged (VP/MAP) chilled foods, with respect to *Clostridium botulinum*.

Following comments by the Committee in 2006 the guidance has been extensively revised, assisted by a small drafting group set up by the FSA to consider the comments arising from the public consultation undertaken in 2004. The drafting group also took the opportunity to look in more detail at specific areas where the guidance needed to be updated to reflect changes that have taken place over the 15 years since the ACMSF first issued its advice. The Agency has circulated the revised guidance to industry stakeholders for further comment, before finalising the final version which is attached.

The ACMSF is invited to:

Comment on the finalised version of the guidance document which the FSA anticipates will be published early in 2008.

Background

1. The attached document relates to the food safety aspects of the manufacture of vacuum and modified atmosphere packaged (VP/MAP) chilled foods, with respect to non-proteolytic *Clostridium botulinum*.

2. The Food Standards Agency guidance is a concise summary of the advice from the Advisory Committee on the Microbiological Safety of Food (ACMSF) in its Report on Vacuum Packaging and Associated Processes (1992)[1], more recent recommendations from the Committee (ACMSF 2006)[2] and existing information contained in the Code of Practice for the Manufacture of Vacuum and Modified Atmosphere Packaged Chilled Foods (1996)[3]. The guidance was drafted in response to a request made by the ACMSF to make the existing guidance more accessible and relevant to manufacturers and retailers of chilled VP/MAP foods, and to Local Authorities carrying out their enforcement duties.

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[1] Advisory Committee on the Microbiological Safety of Food. Report on Vacuum Packaging and Associated Processes, 1992. HMSO, London.
[2] Advisory Committee on the Microbiological Safety of Food. Annual Report 2006. Published by the FSA, August 2007, FSA/1191/0807
[3] Campden and Chorleywood Food Research Association. Guideline No. 11: A Code of Practice for the Manufacture of Vacuum and Modified Atmosphere Packaged Chilled Foods; May 1996.

3. The Committee agreed at the 18th September 2003 meeting that the document should go out to a full public consultation. The consultation raised a number of concerns, and in particular uncertainty relating to the 5 day shelf-life rule for VP/MAP chilled foods. The ACMSF recommended the Food Standards Agency commission an independent review of *C. botulinum* in VP/MAP chilled foods to enable the Committee to consider the evidence further.

4. At its meeting held 8th June 2006 the ACMSF considered the findings of the independent review of *C. botulinum* in VP/MAP chilled foods and recommended the 10 Day shelf-life rule for VP/MAP chilled foods. The Committee also recommended the setting up of a small drafting group by the Food Standards Agency to consider how the guidance could be revised to reflect further issues raised by the public consultation. The VP/MAP Drafting Group was established in October 2006.

5. The Drafting Group included representatives from the Chilled Food Association, Chartered Institute of Environmental Health, British Retail Consortium, Campden and Chorleywood Food Research Association, Institute of Food Research, the food packaging industry and the Food Standards Agency.

6. The remit of the Drafting Group was to re-consider the guidance in light of the comments received through the public consultation and, where appropriate, take account of developments since publication of the 1992 ACMSF report. Such developments include:

    - Widening the scope to reference HACCP principles
    - Make reference to current regulations (e.g. EC 852/2004 on the hygiene of foodstuffs)
    - Include advice on technical issues (e.g. re-wrapping VP/MAP products)
    - Reference currently available microbiological growth models
    - Take account of current industry practice (e.g. Table 1 provides equivalent lethality of 90^{o}C for 10 mins up to a temperature of 100^{o}C)
    - Include more specific advice for Enforcement Officers and Food Business Operators.

7. Over the summer of 2007 the revised guidance was circulated to industry stakeholders for further comment prior to completion of the final version which is attached. When the guidance is published the Agency will draw it to the attention of relevant stakeholders including the European Commission.

8. The Advisory Committee is asked to comment on the final version of the guidance which the FSA anticipates will be published early in 2008.

Secretariat
December 2007