PACIFIC CONSULTATION ON THE DRAFT REGIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION ON FOOD SAFETY IN THE WESTERN PACIFIC

2 June 2017
Nadi, Fiji
Pacific Consultation on the Draft Regional Framework for Action on Food Safety in the Western Pacific
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MEETING REPORT

PACIFIC CONSULTATION ON THE DRAFT REGIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION ON FOOD SAFETY IN THE WESTERN PACIFIC

Convened by:

WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION
REGIONAL OFFICE FOR THE WESTERN PACIFIC

Nadi, Fiji
2 June 2017

Not for sale

Printed and distributed by:

World Health Organization
Regional Office for the Western Pacific
Manila, Philippines

August 2017
NOTE

The views expressed in this report are those of the participants of the Pacific Consultation on the Draft Regional Framework for Action on Food Safety in the Western Pacific and do not necessarily reflect the policies of the conveners.

This report has been prepared by the World Health Organization Regional Office for the Western Pacific for Member States in the Region and for those who participated in the Pacific Consultation on the Draft Regional Framework for Action on Food Safety in the Western Pacific in Nadi, Fiji on 2 June 2017.
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KEYWORDS

Food safety, Regional health planning, Pacific Islands
SUMMARY

Food safety is a fundamental element of good health, and a key component of achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. The International Health Regulations (2005) require Member States to have core food safety capacities in place to detect, assess and respond to food safety events of international concern. Over recent years, good progress has been made in strengthening food safety in the Pacific; however, unsafe food continues to have a significant impact on public health in the region.

The Western Pacific Regional Food Safety Strategy 2011–2015 identified priority strategic actions required to help ensure safe and healthy food. Due to the changing context of food safety and the continued occurrence of food safety incidents and emergencies, the Regional Committee for the Western Pacific requested that WHO facilitate the development of a new regional framework for action on food safety for the Western Pacific. After an 18-month consultative process that included a review of the Regional Food Safety Strategy, the draft Regional Framework for Action on Food Safety in the Western Pacific has been developed.

On 2 June 2017, delegates from 18 Pacific island countries and areas met at the Pacific Consultation on the Draft Regional Framework for Action on Food Safety in the Western Pacific in Nadi, Fiji. The objectives of the Consultation were:

• to review emerging issues and the status of food safety in the Pacific; and
• to review and finalize the draft Regional Framework for Action on Food Safety in the Western Pacific.

The draft Regional Framework for Action on Food Safety in the Western Pacific, including the overall direction, guiding principles, structure, vision, goal, objectives, five action areas and stepwise approach, was presented to the Consultation. Specific Pacific approaches to food safety systems were also presented.

The Consultation agreed in principle on:

• the overall structure and content of the draft regional framework for action including vision, goal, objectives and action areas;
• the guiding principles and strategic direction of the draft framework;
• the need for a stepwise approach for strengthening national food safety systems;
• the proposed Pacific issues and approaches to be addressed by the draft framework; and
• addressing the comments and input provided by the Consultation in the final draft of the framework.

Member States are encouraged to do the following:

1) reviewing the final draft of the Regional Framework for Action on Food Safety in the Western Pacific and provide final feedback by 8 July 2017 through a consultative in-country process; and

2) briefing ministers and other high-level officials who will attend the sixty-eighth session of the WHO Regional Committee for the Western Pacific in October 2017 about the draft regional framework for action.
WHO is requested to do the following:

1) revising the draft *Regional Framework for Action on Food Safety in the Western Pacific* in line with the comments and input provided during the consultation;

2) finalizing the draft regional framework for action and disseminating it to Member States and partners for final confirmation by 1 July 2017; and

3) presenting the draft framework for endorsement to the WHO Regional Committee for the Western Pacific in October 2017.
1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Meeting organization

The World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Office of the Western Pacific organized the Pacific Consultation on the draft Regional Framework for Action on Food Safety in the Western Pacific in Nadi, Fiji on 2 June 2017. The consultation followed the three-day Pacific Meeting on Implementation of the International Health Regulations, or IHR (2005).

Delegates from 18 Pacific island countries and areas, representatives from the Ministry of Primary Industries of New Zealand, Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Pacific Community, United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and other partner organizations met to discuss the draft Regional Framework for Action on Food Safety in the Western Pacific.

1.2 Meeting objectives

The objectives of the Consultation were:

• to review emerging issues and the status of food safety in the Pacific; and
• to review and finalize the draft Regional Framework for Action on Food Safety in the Western Pacific.

1.3 Appointment of officers

Dr Reynold Ian ‘Ofanoa (Tonga) and Dr Neti Herman (Cook Islands) were selected as chairpersons for the consultation. The list of participants and programme are available in Annex 1 and 2, respectively.

2. PROCEEDINGS

2.1 Opening session

Dr Mike Kama welcomed the delegates and thanked WHO, on behalf of the Government of Fiji, for organizing the event. Food safety is one of the IHR (2005) core capacities and a key component of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Unsafe food is an issue in the Pacific for public health and economic activities and in recent years much progress has been made in strengthening food safety. Therefore, it is an opportune time to review the progress of food safety in the Pacific and to discuss the introduction of the Regional Framework for Action on Food Safety in the Western Pacific.

Dr Li Ailan gave opening remarks on behalf of Dr Shin Young-soo, WHO Regional Director for the Western Pacific. She welcomed the delegates and thanked them for their continuing commitment to food safety in the Pacific. Food safety is a fundamental aspect of health and a complex issue requiring multisectoral collaboration. The context of food safety has also changed trust in the safety of the food supply, which is becoming an important issue for strengthening food safety. The Western Pacific Regional Food Safety Strategy 2011–2015 has been updated and will be presented during the Consultation for review and input.
2.1.1 Food safety in a changing environment

Dr Li Ailan provided the current context of food safety as a public health priority in a rapidly changing region where consumer demands and concerns are increasing. The health, socioeconomic and political consequences will be severe if food safety issues are not well managed or if consumers lose trust in the food safety systems. The new *Regional Framework for Action on Food Safety in the Western Pacific* provides future strategic directions and approaches for advancing national food safety systems.

The strategic directions of the framework include: a shift from focusing on “safety” to “trust and confidence”; the creation of enabling factors such as leadership, partnership, competency and resources for improved food safety systems; a focus on risk-based approaches; and alignment with international recommendations and requirements in food safety. The guiding principles of the strategy are that it: is people centred and country focused, consists of a step-by-step approach, aims for safe food for all, provides a learning culture for continuous improvement and fosters a partnership approach. The new framework is in the final stages of drafting after an 18-month consultative process and will be presented for endorsement at the WHO Regional Committee for the Western Pacific in October 2017.

2.2 Plenary 1: Status of food safety in the Pacific and the draft regional framework for action

2.2.1 Implementation of the *Western Pacific Regional Food Safety Strategy 2011–2015*: experiences and lessons learnt

Mr Peter Sousa Hoejskov provided a summary of the achievements and lessons learnt from the implementation of the *Western Pacific Regional Food Safety Strategy 2011–2015*. The Strategy successfully guided action to improve national food control efforts, strengthened key components of national food safety systems, fostered cooperation between Member States and development partners, and positioned food safety as an important health issue. The achievements and challenges were presented for each of the seven themes of the strategy, as were the lessons learnt from the review of the Strategy. While the core components of national food safety systems remain relevant, the rapidly changing context for food safety requires new approaches for managing food safety risks. Food safety systems must be flexible and have capabilities for continuous improvement.

2.2.2 The food safety situation in the Pacific: issues and developments

Mr Moses Pretrick provided a summary of the food safety situation in the Pacific. The reliance by many Pacific countries and areas on imported food is a unique situation for food safety. International food standards are not well developed in the Pacific, nor are there stringent inspection and certification programmes for food exports. Common food safety issues in Pacific island countries and areas include low political will to support food safety, insufficient legislation and policies, and a lack of robust food systems and governance structures. Training and capacity-building for food inspectors, food handlers and industry members are inadequate and there are limited foodborne illness surveillance and food safety data. Food testing capabilities – and therefore food contaminant monitoring – are rare; the use of antibiotics and antimicrobial resistance are not monitored; and consumer education and awareness are required to increase trust in food safety systems and the food supply. There is still much to be done and the new framework will guide the Pacific island countries and areas through the process of improving food safety.
2.2.3 Food safety trust: An enabler and outcome of effective food safety systems

Mr Sundararaman Rajasekar gave a presentation on the role that trust plays in food safety. Several examples where trust had been lost were provided, including the use of horsemeat in Europe and the scandal involving the sale of fake olive oil in Australia. Trust in the food chain is a collective responsibility from the regulator to the verifier and to industry and the consumer. Food producers are responsible for ensuring trust in their products through compliance with food safety systems and standards, monitoring across the supply chain, transparency and communication when things go wrong, and swift action to deal with problems if they occur. Trust at the regulator level is based on sound structures and systems, mutual confidence in regulatory systems and the ability to deliver equivalent levels of protection and safety, transparency and communication when things go wrong. Consumers need to trust that their food is safe – and trust is difficult to obtain but easy to lose.

2.2.4 Overview and process of developing the draft regional framework for action

Mr Peter Sousa Hoejskov summarized the process of developing the draft *Regional Framework for Action on Food Safety in the Western Pacific*, which builds on achievements and experiences from implementing the previous regional food safety strategy. The draft framework guides national food safety authorities in implementing strategic actions to strengthen national food safety systems, advocates high-level political support to enhance food safety and facilitates regional cooperation to monitor progress, set common priorities and learn from best practices.

The vision, mission, objectives and five action areas of the draft framework were presented, as was the stepwise approach for implementation, which consists of: establishing minimum legal and operational requirements (stage 1), the adoption of risk-based approaches to food safety risk management (stage 2), and a fully documented and well-coordinated system throughout the food chain (stage 3.) The consultative process of developing the framework included several face-to-face and virtual consultations with Member States, technical experts and partners, including from the Pacific.

2.2.5 Discussion

There was discussion about the multisectoral nature of food safety and it was pointed out that not all relevant national representatives from these sectors were present at the Consultation. Therefore, the messages delivered during the Consultation would need to be shared and the correct endorsement made upon conclusion of the meeting.

The Pacific practice of having ready-to-eat foods sold by non-food premises such as roadside stalls, from trucks or small stores and self-catered community events was discussed. These food items were usually local foods made in home kitchens and were often the most affordable food options. However, they were also responsible for outbreaks of foodborne disease and therefore considered high-risk foods. The control and monitoring of such food stalls is challenging and there was discussion on how best to include these operations within the food safety system.

Several participants shared their experiences in managing such operators. All agreed that it is necessary to have a food code so that the requirements for running a food business are clear. For some participants, these operators are part of routine food safety processes, and are included in training, monitoring and issuing fees for non-compliance. In one system, as described by a participant, a license is issued to all food vendors and the public is also educated on eating at places where the licence is displayed. Working directly with the stallholders has had some success, as has enforcement measures such as fines and closing the operations. Having an outbreak linked to these food stalls was a catalyst for improving legislation and policies for such
operators. Shifting the responsibility of food safety to the consumer by increasing public awareness was another approach. It was concluded that these operators are a challenge for the food safety system, and that the first step to managing them is to have adequate legislation and policies in place.

*Do you agree with the strategic direction, guiding principles and action areas?*

After some clarification of the links between the vision, mission and objectives and the differences between the action areas in the previous strategy and the new framework, the participants agreed with the strategic direction, guiding principles and action areas of the draft framework.

### 2.3 Plenary 2: Stepwise approach for strengthening national food safety systems

#### 2.3.1 Stages of development of national food safety systems

Mr Peter Sousa Hoejskov outlined the structure of the five action areas of the draft *Regional Framework for Action on Food Safety in the Western Pacific* and described each. The core components of food safety systems remain the same as in the previous strategy: policy and legislation; risk-based inspection and enforcement; information and evidence; incident and emergency response; and information, education and communication. The three stages of implementation were then discussed, and the strategic actions required for each of the action areas presented.

**Plenary discussion**

Several participants shared their experience with food safety against the three implementation stages in draft the framework, with many being at different stages for the different action items. The need to have a regulatory framework for food safety was emphasized as a necessary first step and requirement before the rest of the action items can be addressed.

The lack of multisectoral engagement in food safety and limited linkages between food safety and other sections within health departments were discussed as challenges moving forward and of implementing the framework. Mechanisms for increasing multisectoral engagement were discussed at both the country and regional level.

There was also discussion about labelling of imported foods and who was responsible for ensuring it was done in the appropriate language. It was clarified that the responsibility rests with the exporter or importer to ensure that all imported pre-packaged food items carry labels in English and/or local languages.

Date marking of imported food was another issue. The discussion highlighted that, within the context of the Codex Alimentarius, New Zealand is currently leading the revision of the general standard for the labelling of pre-packaged foods with particular focus on date marking. The revised standard will be considered at the next meeting of the Codex Committee on Food Labelling.

Although the adoption of Codex standards into national legislation promotes harmonization across countries, it was suggested that additional Pacific-specific policies be developed for imported food. This may facilitate international trade as food exporters will need to comply with “Pacific requirements” rather than requirements from individual Pacific island countries and areas.
Do you agree with the components outlined for food safety systems at stages 1, 2 and 3?

It was clarified that completing all the action items in stage 1 was not necessary before moving to stage 2 and then stage 3, and that each Pacific country and area could determine their own starting point and order of action items to be addressed. Following this, the participants reached agreement on the components outlined for food safety systems at stages 1, 2 and 3.

2.3.2 Pacific priorities and approaches for advancing food safety systems

Mr Peter Sousa Hoejskov presented issues in food safety that are unique to the Pacific and that may need to be considered in the draft framework. This included the need to strengthen risk-based food import inspection and export certification as the Pacific is reliant on imported food; improve access to accredited food laboratories; implement measures and communicate with the public about ways to mitigate the effect of climate change on food safety; and implement measures to address food-related noncommunicable disease risk factors.

Pacific approaches to strengthen food safety systems included:

1) strengthen and align food safety regulatory frameworks and follow available Pacific-specific guidance;
2) improve regional cooperation for regulatory frameworks, access to accredited food laboratories, information exchange and progress monitoring;
3) integrate interventions to strengthen food safety systems into other programmes and strategies; and
4) utilize online platforms for information, education and communication.

Plenary discussion

Several participants brought up the difficulties in accessing accredited food laboratories, including finding a laboratory willing to conduct the testing, difficulties in packaging and shipment, the potentially long waiting time for results, and the costs of testing and analysis. The two requirements for testing food samples were also discussed: testing suspected foods during an outbreak and the routine monitoring of the safety of the food supply. It was emphasized that food testing during an outbreak is often not required to implement control measures and can be done later in the investigation, yet the routine testing of the food supply does require regular access to food laboratories. WHO summarized the laboratories that are available for food testing which include the three WHO collaborating centres for food contamination monitoring in China, Hong Kong SAR (China) and Singapore, as well as the food laboratory at the Institute of Applied Science, University of the South Pacific, Fiji, and other laboratories in the Pacific Rim. It was recommended that a system for accessing these laboratories be developed so that Pacific island countries and areas can access these laboratories for food testing when required.

Another issue was how to prioritize the action areas, especially for those countries that did not have an environmental health officer in their health department. For these participants, knowing where to start for food safety is the challenge.

There was some discussion about the Pacific priorities and whether these were additional requirements on top of the action areas of the framework that also needed to be prioritized for implementation by Member States. This was clarified and changes suggested to the terminology in the draft framework for the Pacific section. This included changing “Pacific-specific priorities” to “Considering the Pacific context, these are some issues to be considered by Pacific
Member States”. The terminology of the second and third Pacific approaches was also revised to reflect the discussions. Regional cooperation was explained as actions that can be done together, or at the regional level, to facilitate work in the Pacific island countries and areas, and examples of linkages with other programmes were included, such as using the IHR (2005) for foodborne surveillance, risk assessment and response.

Do you agree with the proposed priorities and approaches for strengthening food safety in the Pacific?

The participants agreed in principle with the Pacific issues and approaches presented.

2.4 Plenary 3: Monitoring and coordination in a broader context

2.4.1 Programmes and strategies related to the draft regional framework for action

Mr Peter Sousa Hoejskov outlined other programmes and strategies that link to the draft Regional Framework for Action on Food Safety in the Western Pacific. This includes universal health coverage, the Sustainable Development Goals, IHR (2005) and the Asia Pacific Strategy for Emerging Diseases and Public Health Emergencies or APSED III, and programmes for antimicrobial resistance, neglected tropical diseases, nutrition and noncommunicable diseases, and health and the environment. Linking food safety with these other initiatives and programmes may provide shared resources and funding for food safety.

2.4.2 Monitoring and evaluation of the draft regional framework for action

Mr Peter Sousa Hoejskov suggested potential mechanisms for the monitoring and evaluation of the draft framework, most of which are already being conducted. This included the IHR (2005) monitoring and evaluation framework, in particular the food safety section of the annual IHR monitoring questionnaire and the food safety chapter in the joint external evaluation tool. A regional cooperation mechanism was also suggested, with advice sought on the best way to report back, how often and in what format.

Plenary discussion

Several participants provided examples of how their food safety programmes were already linked with other health sectors, especially environmental health and noncommunicable diseases. Using these linkages to leverage funding for food safety was seen as beneficial.

The terms “food security” and “food safety” were also clarified. Food security is defined as: when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life (World Food Summit 2009). Food safety is a component of food security, and is focused on the handling, preparation and storage of food in ways that prevent foodborne illness.

Participants suggested using existing monitoring and evaluation processes for the draft framework. As food safety is a core capacity under IHR (2005), the IHR (2005) review processes include food safety and should be used to prevent duplication of effort. This includes the annual IHR monitoring questionnaire, the biannual Pacific IHR meeting and the joint external evaluation for those Pacific island countries and areas that volunteer to undertake it.

Conducting an initial assessment of current food safety systems of the Pacific island countries and areas was also recommended to assist in evaluating the framework over time.
3. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1 Conclusions

The draft *Regional Framework for Action on Food Safety in the Western Pacific*, including the overall direction, guiding principles, structure, vision, goal, objectives, five action areas and stepwise approach, was presented to the Consultation. Specific Pacific approaches to food safety systems were also presented.

The Consultation agreed in principle on:

- the overall structure and content of the draft regional framework for action including vision, goal, objectives and action areas;
- the guiding principles and strategic direction of the draft framework;
- the need for a stepwise approach for strengthening national food safety systems;
- the proposed Pacific issues and approaches to be addressed by the draft framework; and
- addressing the comments and input provided by the Consultation in the final draft framework.

3.2 Recommendations

3.2.1 Recommendations for Member States

Member States are encouraged to do the following:

1) reviewing the final draft of the *Regional Framework for Action on Food Safety in the Western Pacific* and provide final feedback by 8 July 2017 through a consultative in-country process; and

2) briefing ministers and other high-level officials who will attend the sixty-eighth session of the WHO Regional Committee for the Western Pacific in October 2017 about the draft regional framework for action.

3.2.2 Recommendations for WHO

WHO is requested to do the following:

1) revising the draft *Regional Framework for Action on Food Safety in the Western Pacific* in line with the comments and input provided during the Consultation;

2) finalizing the draft regional framework for action and disseminating it to Member States and partners for final confirmation by 1 July 2017; and

3) presenting the draft framework for endorsement to the WHO Regional Committee for the Western Pacific in October 2017.
ANNEXES

ANNEX 1. LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

1. PARTICIPANTS

AMERICAN SAMOA
Mr Marion Fitisemanu, Deputy Director of Operation American Samoa Department of Health, P.O. Box 5666 Pago Pago 96799. Tel. No: (684) 770 1046, Email: papaliifitisemanu@doh.as

COOK ISLANDS
Dr Neti Herman, Director of Community Health Services Ministry of Health, PO Box 109 Tupapa, Rarotonga. Tel. No: (682) 29664, Email: neti.herman@cookislands.gov.ck

FIJI
Mr Dip Chand, Chief Health Inspector, National Advisor Environmental Health, Ministry of Health & Medical Services, 88 Army St., Government Building Toorak, Suva. Tel. No: (679) 890 5051, Email: dip.chand@govnet.gov.fj
Dr Mike Kama, National Adviser, Communicable Diseases Centres for Disease Control, Ministry of Health Suva. Tel. No: (679) 990 6956, Email: mike.kama@health.gov.fj
Mr Alipate Momoka, Head, Food Unit/Competent Authority, Ministry of Health & Medical Services P.O. Box 2223, Gov’t. Buildings Suva. Tel. No: (679) 330 6177, Email: alipate.momoka@govnet.gov.fj

GUAM
Mr James Gillan, Director, Public Health and Social Services Office of the Governor of Guam, 123 Chalan Kareta Mangilao. Tel. No: (1671) 735 7102, Email: James.Gillan@dphss.guam.gov

KIRIBATI
Mr Tebikau Tibwe, Acting Deputy Director, Ministry of Health and Medical Services, P.O. Box 268, Bikenibeu South Tarawa. Tel. No: (686) 28100, Email: tioran@gmail.com
MARSHALL ISLANDS
Dr Helentina Garstang, Medical Director of Public Health, RMI, Ministry of Health, P.O. Box 16 Majuro.
Tel. No: (692) 625 3632,
Email: aina.garstang@gmail.com

NAURU
Mr Vincent Scotty, Food Inspector, Public Health Department Ministry of Health Republic of Nauru.
Tel. No: (674) 557 3147,
Email: vincent.scotty@health.gov.nr

NEW CALEDONIA
Dr Martine Noel, Médecin de veille sanitaire, du contrôle sanitaire aux frontières et des plans d’urgence
SSP - DASS NC 5, rue Gallieni BP N4 98845 Noumea.
Tel. No: (687) 243710, Email: martine.noel@gouv.nc

NIUE
Ms Alicia A.R. Hipa, Public Health Officer, Health Information Office, Niue Fouo Hospital Alofi.
Tel. No: (683) 4100, Email: alicia.hipa@mail.gov.nu

NORTHERN MARIANA ISLANDS, COMMONWEALTH OF THE
Mr John Tagabuel, Director, Commonwealth Healthcare Corporation, Navy Hill, P.O. Box 500409 Saipan.
Tel. No: (670) 664 4870/72,
Email: john.tababuel@dph.gov.mp

PALAU
Ms Rosemary Kiep Environmental Health Specialist
Division of Environmental Health Bureau of Public Health Ministry of Health, P.O. Box 6027 Koror.
Tel. No: (680) 488 6073, Email: rmkiep@gmail.com

PAPUA NEW GUINEA
Mr Aaron Gwamatae, Program Officer, Food Safety and Quarantine, National Health Department,
P.O. Box 807 Waigani. Tel. No: (675) 301 3705,
Email: Aaron_Gwamatae@health.gov.pg

SAMOA
Mr Ulalei Pese, Environmental Health Officer, Food Safety Unit, Ministry of Health, Private Bag Apia.
Tel. No: (685) 68100, Email: UlaleiP@health.gov.ws

SOLOMON ISLANDS
Ms Alison Ripiapu Sio, Public Health Emergency and Surveillance Manager, Ministry of Health & Medical Services, P.O. Box 349 Honiara.
Tel. No: (677) 23650,
Email: sioalison7@gmail.com

TOKELAU
Ms Barbara Tali, National Health Educator (Health Promotion), Department of Health, Nukunonu.
Tel. No: (069) 024145,
Email: levibarb.tali@gmail.com
TONGA
Dr Reynold Ian ‘Ofanoa, Chief Medical Officer, Public Health Division, Ministry of Health, P.O. Box 59 Nuku’alofa. Tel. No: (676) 23200, Email: reynoldofanoa@gmail.com

TUVALU
Dr Aloima Taufilo, Medical Officer, Ministry of Health, Private Mail Bag, Vaiaku Funafuti. Tel. No: (688) 700 5177, Email: ataufilo@gmail.com

VANUATU
Mr Len Reginald Tarivonda, Director of Public Health, Department of Public, Health PMB 9009, Port Vila. Tel. No: (678) 22512, Email: ltarivonda@vanuatu.gov.vu

2. TEMPORARY ADVISERS

Mr Moses E. Pretrick, National Environmental Health Coordinator, National Government Department of Health and Social Affairs, P.O. Box PS-70, Palikir Pohnpei Federated States of Micronesia. Tel. No: (691) 320 8300, Email: mpretrick@fsnhealth.fm

Mr Sundararaman Rajasekar, Senior Programme Manager, Ministry of Primary Industries, P.O. Box 2526, Wellington New Zealand. Tel. No: (644) 894 0100, Email: Raj.Rajasekar@mpi.govt.nz

Mr Ratu Jope Tamani, Trade Development Advisor, Forum Fisheries Agencies, Honiara, Solomon Islands. Tel. No: (677) 783 1470, Email: jope.tamani@gmail.com

3. CONSULTANT

Ms Michelle McPherson, Office of the WHO Representative in the South Pacific, Level 4 Provident Plaza, One Downtown Boulevard, 33 Ellery Street, Suva Fiji. Tel. No: (679) 3304600 & 3234100, Email: michellemcmpherson300@gmail.com

4. RESOURCE PERSONS

Ms Rachel Cuzin, Conference Interpreter-translator, Secretariat of the Pacific Community, CPS-B.P. D5, 98848, Noumea, New Caledonia. Tel. No: (687) 262000, Email: rachlec@spc.int

Ms Christelle Petite, Conference Interpreter-translator, Secretariat of the Pacific Community, CPS-B.P. D5, 98848, Noumea, New Caledonia. Tel. No: (687) 262000, Email: christellep@spc.int

Ms Aurelie Hamaide, Freelance Conference Interpreter-translator. Tel. No: (687) 895574, Email: aurelie_hamaide@hotmail.com
5. OBSERVERS

FIJI NATIONAL UNIVERSITY
Dr Amelia Turagabeci, Lecturer in Environmental Health, College of Medicine, Nursing & Health Sciences, Fiji National University, P.O. Box 7222, Nasinu, Fiji. Tel. No: (679) 339 4000, Email: amelia.turagabeci@fnu.ac.fj

FIJI MINISTRY OF HEALTH & MEDICAL SERVICES
Ms Edwina Fong, Environmental Health Officer, Ministry of Health & Medical Services, Environmental Health Unit, Nadi Airport, Fiji. Tel. No: (679) 672 2474, Email: pritika.raju@govnet.gov.fj

FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION OF THE UNITED NATIONS
Ms Ann Hayman, Food Safety and Nutrition Consultant, FAO Subregional Office for the Pacific Islands, Apia, Samoa. Tel. No: (685) 22 127 Ext. 14, Email: Ann.Hayman@fao.org

PACIFIC COMMUNITY
Ms Salanieta Duitututaga, Team Leader, Public Health Laboratory Strengthening, Public Health Division, Research, Evidence and Information Programme, Pacific Community, B.P.D5 98848 Noumea, New Caledonia. Tel No: (687) 26 20 22, Email: salanietad@spc.int

Dr Onofre Edwin Merilles, Epidemiologist, Public Health Division, Pacific Community, B.P.D5 98848 Noumea, New Caledonia, Tel. No. : (687) 262 000, Email: jojom@spc.int

REPUBLIC OF PALAU
Ms Hilda Masahiro, Environmental Health Technician, Division of Environmental Health, Bureau of Public Health, Ministry of Health, PO Box 6027 Palau. Email: hilda.masahiro@palauhealth.org

UNIVERSITY OF THE SOUTH PACIFIC
Dr David Rohindra, Associate Dean Planning and Quality, Senior Lecturer in Chemistry, Faculty of Science Technology and Environment, The University of the South Pacific Suva Fiji. Tel. No: (679) 323 2867, Email: rohindra_d@usp.ac.fj

US CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION
Dr William Thane Hancock, Career Epidemiology Field Officer, U.S Affiliated Pacific Islands, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 310 Ladera Lane #712 Mangilao, Guam 96913. Tel. No: (671) 864 1981, Email: vie1@cdc.gov
6. SECRETARIAT

Dr Li Ailan, Regional Emergency Director Health Emergencies Programme and Director, Health Security and Emergencies, WHO, Regional Office for the Western Pacific, P.O. Box 2932, 1000 Manila, Philippines. Tel. No: (632) 528 8001, Email: lia@who.int

Mr Peter Sousa Hoejskov, Technical Lead – Food Safety, WHO, Regional Office for the Western Pacific, P.O. Box 2932, 1000 Manila, Philippines. Tel. No: (632) 528 8001, Email: hoejskovp@who.int

Dr Eunyoung Ko, Medical Officer for Northern Micronesia Region, Country Liaison Officer for Federated States of Micronesia, Palau, Marshall Islands, Department of Health and Social Affairs, 1 F/Mogethin Building, National Capital Complex, Palikir, FSM 96941, Tel. No.: (691) 320 2619, Fax No.: (001) 8668683940; Email: koe@who.int

Dr Angela Merianos, Team Coordinator, Pacific Health Security, Communicable Diseases and Climate Change, Division of Pacific Technical Support, WHO Representative Office in the South Pacific, P.O. Box 113, Suva, Fiji. Tel. No: (679) 323 4100, Email: merianosa@who.int

Dr Wendy Snowdon, Team Coordinator, Pacific NCD and Health through the Life-Course, Division of Pacific Technical Support, WHO Representative in Office the South Pacific, P.O. Box 113, Suva, Fiji. Tel. No: (679) 323 4100, Email: snowdonw@who.int

Ms Chelsea Edwards, Intern, Division of Pacific Technical Support, WHO Representative Office in the South Pacific, P.O. Box 113, Suva, Fiji. Tel. No: (679) 323 4100; Email: chelsea.edwards@uqconnect.edu.au
ANNEX 2. MEETING PROGRAMME

08:30 Registration

Opening Session

9:00 Opening prayer

9:05 Welcome and opening addresses
- Dr Mike Kama, Fiji Ministry of Health and Medical Services
- Dr Li Ailan, Director, Health Security and Emergencies, WHO Regional Office for the Western Pacific (WHO/WPRO)

Introductions

Background and objectives

Nomination of Chair, Co-chair and Rapporteur

Administrative announcements

Food safety in a changing environment
- Dr Li Ailan, WHO/WPRO

Group photo

10:00 Coffee Break

10:00-12:00 Plenary 1: Status of food safety in the Pacific and the draft regional framework for action

10:00 Implementation of the Western Pacific - Regional Food Safety Strategy 2011-2015: Experiences and lessons learnt
- Mr Peter Sousa Hoejskov, WHO/WPRO

10:15 The food safety situation in the Pacific: Issues and developments
- Mr Moses Pretrick, Department of Health and Social Affairs, Federated States of Micronesia

10:30 Food safety trust: An enabler and outcome of effective food safety systems
- Mr Raj Rajasekar, Ministry for Primary Industries, New Zealand

10:45 Overview and process of developing the draft Regional Framework for Action on Food Safety in the Western Pacific
- Mr Peter Sousa Hoejskov, WHO/WPRO

11:00 Questions and clarification

12:00 Lunch
13:00 – 15:00 Plenary 2: Stepwise approach for strengthening national food safety systems

13:00  Stages of development of national food safety systems  
   - Mr Peter Sousa Hoejskov, WHO/WPRO

13:10  Plenary discussion: Key components of food safety systems at different levels of development  
   - Mr Raj Rajasekar, Ministry for Primary Industries, New Zealand

14:00  Pacific priorities and approaches for advancing food safety systems  
   - Mr Peter Sousa Hoejskov, WHO/WPRO

14:10  Plenary discussion: Pacific priorities and approaches  
   - Mr Jope Tamani, Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency, Solomon Islands

15:30  Coffee break

16:00 – 17:00 Plenary 3: Monitoring and coordination in a broader context

16:00  Programmes and strategies related to the regional framework  
   - Mr Peter Sousa Hoejskov, WHO/WPRO

16:10  Monitoring and evaluation of the framework  
   - Mr Peter Sousa Hoejskov, WHO/WPRO

16:10  Plenary discussion: How to establish a sustainable regional coordination mechanism?  
   - Mr Moses Pretrick, Department of Health and Social Affairs, Federated States of Micronesia

17:00 – 17:30 Plenary 4: Next steps

17:00  Discussion of the meeting’s conclusions and recommendations  
   - Mr Peter Sousa Hoejskov, WHO/WPRO

17:30  Closing remarks

17:45  Reception