

Research and Library Services



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**NEW EC MICROBIOLOGICAL TESTING LEGISLATION
FOR MEAT PROCESSING PLANTS**

In response to recent food scares and the perceived requirement to tighten up food safety legislation the European Commission has introduced legislation, expected to become national law in June 2002, which will require meat processing plants to carry out microbiological testing of carcasses. This briefing note outlines the requirements of the legislation.

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1. WHAT IS THE LEGISLATION THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION IS BRINGING FORWARD?

The legislation is:

2001/471/EC: Commission Decision of 8 June 2001 laying down rules for the regular checks on the general hygiene carried out by the operators in establishments according to Directive 64/433/EEC on health conditions for the production and marketing of fresh meat and Directive 71/118/EEC on health problems affecting the production and placing on the market of fresh poultry meat.

2. TO WHOM WILL THIS APPLY AND WHEN WILL IT BE INTRODUCED?

It will apply to "meat establishments" i.e. principally processing plants (red meat and poultry), although operators of cutting plants and cold stores will be required to implement and maintain a permanent procedure developed in accordance with the Hazards Analysis and Critical Control Point principles (HACCP) referred to in the legislation. The requirements of the decision are to be introduced by June 8th 2002. Member States may apply a period of up to 24 months for small meat establishments¹ before introduction of the requirements.

3. WHAT WILL BE THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE LEGISLATION?

It will require plants to remove small tissue samples of the carcase for microbiological testing. The Decision indicates that between 5 and 10 carcasses should be sampled on a single day during each week. This can be reduced to fortnightly testing if satisfactory results are obtained on six consecutive weeks.

The Decision also introduces standard procedures for carrying out microbiological checks in fresh meat premises on cleaning and disinfection (for slaughterhouses and cutting plants) and on carcasses (slaughterhouses only)¹.

4. WHAT IS THE CURRENT PROCEDURE FOR MICROBIOLOGICAL TESTING?

Currently carcasses and work surfaces are swabbed i.e. tissue samples are not taken. The Food Standards Agency is looking at the possibility of continuing with the swabbing method in order to comply with the forthcoming legislation as an alternative to tissue removal.

¹ It will be up to Member States to decide on a definition of small plants. However, 'low throughput' establishments are defined in the *Fresh Meat (Hygiene and Inspection) Regulations Northern Ireland 1997* as premises processing "not more than 1000 livestock units each year at a rate not exceeding 20 each week".

With regards to birds and rabbits, in *The Poultry Meat, Farmed Game Bird Meat and Rabbit Meat (Hygiene and Inspection) Regulations Northern Ireland 1995* "low throughput" is defined as "not more than 150 000 birds or 300 000 rabbits per year".

These definitions may give an indication of what "small plant" actually means.

5. CONSULTATION

The Food Standards Agency (FSA) is required to consult formally on proposals for new regulations made under the Food Safety Act. The consultation period in Northern Ireland began in mid January and will end on the 9th March 2002.

The Agency intends to publish guidelines on microbiological testing of carcasses to assist the meat industry in the implementation of this requirement, which will include an alternative to the destructive sampling method set out in the Annex to the Decision.