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PREVENTION AND REDUCTION OF MICROBIOLOGICAL CONTAMINATION – CONSIDERATION THROUGH THE FOOD CHAIN

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1. HOW COMMERCE “INFLUENCES” MICROBIOLOGICAL CONTAMINATION?

Two factors relative to commerce’s activities have an impact on microbiological contamination of foodstuffs:

a) Temperature (maintenance of cold chain)

b) Handling of food with regard to

- simple commercialisation of unpacked food (i.e. fresh produce or meat wholesaler)
- processing of foodstuffs (i.e. in a bakery counter of a supermarket)
- simple preparatory operations (cutting of ham or cheese etc.)

2. MAIN TOOL: APPLICATION OF HYGIENE LEGISLATION AND IN PARTICULAR HACCP :

Hazard analysis based techniques or HACCP (Hazard Analysis Critical Control points) require retailers to look at their operations in a different way, and conduct an assessment of the risks to food safety within their businesses and to apply the necessary precautions to deal with these. It is a general obligation to ensure that food is prepared, handled and sold in a hygienic way. Retailers (and any other food operator) must review their activities, identify the critical steps they need to take to ensure food safety and ensure that these are properly assessed.

Retailers very much support HACCP based risk assessment and risk management. This system, often defined as “made by professionals for professionals”, certainly has many advantages. It focuses on prevention and systematic, effective process controls rather than relying on end product testing. It is the best application of the principle of self-responsibility.

In practice,

- respect of temperatures: frequent verification of temperatures, of functioning of installations, control of cold chain)
- auto-control (sampling and microbiological testing at receipt of a product , in the shops)
- adoption of guides of good hygiene practice.
- effective and efficient traceability systems in place allowing immediate withdrawal of products in case of non compliance or necessary action to correct failure in the HACCP system.

3. AN INTEGRATED FOOD SUPPLY CHAIN

Finally, in their search to ensure food safety and quality and to best manage the risk in the food chain, large European retailers have been working for own brand products on the adoption of standards setting out requirements for suppliers:

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- CIES global food safety initiative
 - Eurep Gap
 - BRC standards
 - Traceability (Food Trace)

IN CONCLUSION:

- The European food chain acts in a responsible way and is organising itself to achieve the ultimate objective of food safety and consumer protection. In a more and more integrated food chain, retailers are in very close contact with their suppliers, sharing the common goal of the consumer's satisfaction. By working together, retailers can assess and manage the risk involved along the whole supply chain. **Therefore, the regulatory framework should set objectives. It is the responsibility of the operators to develop the most appropriate means to achieve these objectives.**
- **Efficient controls and independent audits are paramount for the success of any mandatory or voluntary system.**
- **Consumer has also its part of responsibility in the prevention of microbiological contamination. Therefore particular emphasis must be given to consumer education.**