

Notes from Launch Event: Improved Food Safety through Distance Learning, March 31, 2021

Participants: More than 90 people attended the launch of the food safety distance learning tool. The event was moderated by Lee Gross, International Program Specialist with USDA FAS Global Programs. Presenters were:

- Mark Slupek, Deputy Administrator USDA FAS GP
- Julie Moss, Director, IAS CFSAN FDA
- Mike Michener, Deputy Assistant to the Administrator, USAID RFS
- Molly Gonzales, Instructional Assistant Professor, CET TAMU
- Jeffery Read, International Policy Analyst, IAS CFSAN FDA
- Shannon McMurtrey, Senior International Coordination Specialist, FSIS

Purpose: To launch of the USDA's Food Safety Network's 16th distance learning module

The module was developed in partnership with the Food Safety Inspection Service (FSIS), U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), and Texas A&M University (TAMU). The web-based course is intended to provide foreign officials and other stakeholders with an overview of key regulatory issues for food safety. Topics include: a history of the U.S. food safety system, the value of a modern food safety system, and core organizing principles for food safety system modernization. The webinar was recorded and is accessible via the FSN Agrilinks page.

Mark Slupek provided some background on the global programs and the cooperation between USDA and USAID towards developing harmonized SPS regulations across countries. He indicated that through this partnership a suite of SPS distance learning modules had been developed in collaboration with TAMU.

Julie Moss explained that FDA's role is to find, track, and eliminate food borne illnesses from the food supply and in cosmetics. FDA has embarked on a new era of smarter food safety with an initiative designed to leverage new digital technologies to develop and reinforce strong and efficient food safety practices.

Shawn Baker emphasized that USAID is working to build strong local capacity through food safety systems that:

- Reduce the world's bad food
- Improve nutrition
- Reduce economic losses associated with food borne toxins and contaminants
- Decrease food losses and concomitant environmental impact

Molly Gonzales described the history of the SPS modules developed at TAMU. Karen Stuck was a key developer of the modules. A pilot project was begun with Pakistan regulators originally designed for in-country and in-person training. Work on the food safety module was begun in 2020 and the materials are available at: <https://spscourses.com> and via a google app.

Training with the modules begins with a pre-assessment that provides a preview of the course and an assessment of the country food safety system. Courses consist of:

1. Evolution of food safety systems
2. Value of a modern food safety system
3. Core principals of a food safety system, guided by CODEX, WHO and FAO standards
4. A modernization story – a case study of a fictional country.

A post assessment is taken after completion of the course. A passing grade of 70 or better qualifies participants to receive a certificate of completion.

Two experts, Jeff Read and Shannon McMurtrey, addressed questions by the moderator, Lee Gross.

- What are the main challenges to creating a safe food system? Both experts agreed that a major challenge to the implementation of modern food safety systems was the complex nature of global food supply chain that makes it difficult for regulators to ensure compliance with CODEX, HACCP and good food practices. Collaborative initiatives are working to make sure food is safe and that people can understand food safety principals by bridging knowledge gaps.
- What interactions is the U.S. having with other countries? A main form of interaction by the U.S. with other countries is describing the U.S. system and how the U.S. handles / approaches food safety risks through its policies and regulation of the food industry. Some foreign regulators participate in the USDA Cochran Fellowship program and are brought to the U.S. for in-person experiences and training. Also, other than in this year with COVID-19 restrictions on travel, FSIS holds annual food safety seminars for 20 – 30 countries and this food safety module will become a prerequisite for course attendants in the future.
- Will the modules be offered in additional languages, including indigenous languages? The SPS Modules will be updated as new information warrants and there are discussions about expanding the number of languages used in the modules. Currently, the modules are available in three languages, English, French and Spanish, with some modules in Dari.