

International food standards: The Codex Alimentarius

Introduction

The Codex Alimentarius is a joint initiative of the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) and World Health Organisation (WHO), with the main purpose to:

- Protect public health
- Promote fair trade in food

The Codex Alimentarius is an intergovernmental organisation in which more than 167 countries are represented. Besides representatives of those national governments, also so-called “observers”, i.e. representatives of international organisations, the business community and consumer organisations are represented.

The ‘three sisters’

- Codex Alimentarius

The Codex Alimentarius is the international food safety standards-setting body within the UN family of international organizations. Codex was created in 1963 by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and World Health Organization (WHO) to develop food standards, guidelines, and related texts such as codes of practice.

- International Plant Protection Convention, or IPPC

The plant health standard-setting body of FAO. The purpose of the IPPC is to secure a common and effective action to prevent the spread and introduction of pests of plants and plant products, and to promote appropriate measures for their control. The convention extends to the protection of natural flora and plant products.

- World Organization for Animal Health, or OIE

The OIE is an intergovernmental organization created by the International Agreement of January 25, 1924. It is an animal health standard-setting body.

This document provides information on the role of the Codex Alimentarius in international food trade, and the relation between international Codex standards and European legislation.

The Codex Alimentarius

As mentioned, the protection of consumer health is one of the main aims of the Codex Alimentarius. The activities in respect to this subject focus for example on the development of global uniform standards that promote food safety. The main task of the Codex Alimentarius is thus to develop such international standards and to keep them up to date. Examples of topics that are currently covered by the Codex standards are:

- food safety and hygiene
- the processing and storage of food
- food labelling
- quality
- packaging

The Codex standards are used by policy makers, for instance the European Union, to develop their own food standards. However, in many cases Codex standards are being used for defining a minimum. This means that final standards could be more strict than the original Codex standard. So, compliance to a Codex standard does not automatically mean compliance with a requirement of the EU. The EU is allowed to do so on the condition that research is the justification of the deviation of the standard.

➔ [The Codex Alimentarius standards](#) can be found on the website of the Codex, please see the external link.

The role of the Codex in international food trade

Partly because of the growing world trade in food and the increasing interest of consumers in food safety issues, the interest in the Codex Alimentarius is rising as well. The founding of the WTO (World Trade Organisation) also increased the importance of the Codex, as the WTO uses the Codex standards as a frame of reference in international disputes on food safety issues. In this respect, the SPS (Sanitary and Phytosanitary) Agreement is of importance.

SPS Agreement

With the establishment of the WTO in 1995, the Agreement of the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (the SPS Agreement) entered into force. It sets out the basic rules for food safety and animal and plant health standards. The SPS Agreement furthermore requires that sanitary and phytosanitary measures (including measures concerning food safety) be applied for no other purpose than that of ensuring food safety and animal and plant health. In other words, it restricts the use of unjustified measures.

WTO Member countries are therefore encouraged to use international standards, guidelines and recommendations for the protection of food safety where they exist. For food safety, this refers to the work of the Codex Alimentarius. However, if there is scientific justification, countries may use measures which result in more strict standards. The agreement furthermore allows countries to use different standards and different methods for the inspection of products.

In conclusion

The implications of the SPS Agreement are that countries are stimulated to use internationally accepted standards for food safety, i.e. the Codex Standards. But when there is scientific justification that for the protection of food safety more strict measures are needed, or when the Codex Standards have not yet covered a specific issue, it is accepted that such measures are implemented.

When there is a dispute between two countries about certain standards, the WTO will use the Codex Alimentarius standards as a frame of reference. In case a country applies more strict standards, or has developed its own standards where no Codex standards have been developed, scientific proof should be available to justify this. When this is not the case, the WTO will rule that these standards are a barrier to trade which is not necessary to protect consumer health.

Please note that your products always need to comply with the relevant regulations of the country where you would like to market those products. Countries can use the Codex Alimentarius standards that are internationally accepted standards based on scientific knowledge, when developing their regulations. However, in case for a certain health hazard no Codex standards have been developed yet, or in case a country is of the opinion that more strict measures are needed to protect consumer health, more strict measures will be applied.