

For the attention of Local Authorities, shellfish harvesters, approved shellfish establishment, laboratories offering toxin testing other interested parties

April 2014

PILOT: MANAGING TOXIN RISKS: GUIDANCE FOR HARVESTERS AND PROCESSORS

This letter introduces guidance on toxin risk management in Scotland which has been revised following consultation which ended on 28th March 2014.

Attached:

Toxin guidance document (version 2): "Managing toxin risks: Guidance for harvesters and processors."

Background

Following consultation which took place during February and March 2014, the Food Standards Agency in Scotland (FSAS) has issued revised guidance which is intended to help shellfish harvesters and approved establishments to better manage risks associated with shellfish toxins.

The guidance aims to demonstrate to food businesses how they can use available evidence to develop food safety management systems for controlling the risks of biotoxins, which are in line with legislative requirements. The central tenet of the document is the concept of a 'traffic light' system which indicates how harvesting actions should be adjusted in response to green, amber and red trigger levels being breached in either phytoplankton or biotoxin results obtained from the official control monitoring programme or tests carried out by businesses themselves. During high risk periods, the application of this system will generally mean increased levels of end product testing by food businesses prior to product being released onto the market.

Consultation responses

FSAS was grateful to receive a number of consultation responses from industry, local authorities as well as laboratories from both Scotland and elsewhere in the UK.

Respondee were generally supportive of the guidance document in principle although some reservations were expressed about the potential impact on smaller businesses. During a workshop held in Aberdeen on 7th March several queries were

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raised about the robustness of the phytoplankton triggers used in the draft document, and whether sufficient help was available to those working in the wild shellfish sector. In addition several requests were made to improve the usability of official control data. A summary of responses, and our response to them, will be placed on the FSA website shortly.

The key changes made to the guidance document following consultation are as follows:

- **Phytoplankton trigger increase.** 'Amber' triggers for *Alexandrium* spp. and *Pseudo-nitzschia* spp. have increased. FSAS will however examine these again later in the year following consideration by the National Reference Laboratory Network for Biotoxins meeting in May.
- **The flesh trigger for ASP has reduced.** This means that both ASP and PSP 'red' triggers have now been set at half the regulatory limit.
- **A section on enforcement action** which will follow any toxin results over the regulatory limit in the official control programme, has now been included.

Pilot: next steps

The guidance should now be considered 'live' and a letter will be issued shortly to local authorities asking that they ensure that shellfish businesses in their areas have sufficiently robust risk management systems in place. Application of this guidance document by food businesses will be considered appropriate due diligence. However, this system is not a regulatory requirement and where businesses present alternative risk management models based on robust data, then these should be considered by local authorities. FSAS is not in a position to enter into discussions with individual businesses regarding their own risk management strategies at this stage.

By issuing this guidance, our intention is not to make shellfish production unsustainable for smaller businesses, rather to ensure that all businesses are fully cognisant of the risks associated with product harvested from their area. FSAS has developed the guidance in collaboration with the industry with the aim of preventing outbreaks and product recalls associated with Scottish shellfish, which have a detrimental impact on both public health and the reputation of the industry.

Over the course of the year FSAS will consider holding additional workshops should sufficient interest be expressed by harvesters. Please let me know if this would be of interest to you.

As mentioned above, phytoplankton trigger levels will be considered in further detail in early summer which may result in a further amendment to the guidance document in due course.

We also intend to commission an independent evaluation of the guidance in order to assess:

- the impact the guidance has had on businesses and local authorities

- alternative risk management models which may be in use
- access to technical services across Scotland

Once this work has completed we will then consider what changes, if any, need to be made. Should you have any queries regarding the guidance please do not hesitate to get in touch.

Yours faithfully,

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