

Survey program: overview

March 2026

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Introduction

The NSW Food Authority routinely conducts surveys to gather information on food safety in NSW. These surveys assist in preventing foodborne illness and maintaining food safety in NSW. Assessing the survey data allows the Food Authority to identify key food safety issues and develop systems and processes to manage these issues effectively.

What is a survey?

A survey is a method of collecting, analysing and interpreting data on a specific topic. The Food Authority uses surveys to collect information on food products and food handling practices used by businesses that sell food in NSW. This information is used to assess levels of compliance with regulatory requirements. Surveys do not include foodborne illness investigations or field work conducted as part of compliance investigations or audits.

Why conduct surveys?

The survey program is an essential research tool for the Food Authority. Data gathered from surveys provides essential information to a wide variety of internal and external groups such as the Food Authority's teams, the Industry Consultative Committees, the food industry and consumers.

The survey program helps the Food Authority fulfil its research function under the *Food Act 2003* (NSW). Section 108 Clause 2(g) of the Act states that a function of the Food Authority is to carry out such research as is necessary in order to perform its other functions.

Functions of the Food Authority under the Act that require research include:

1. *provide advice or recommendations to the Minister on the establishment, development or alteration of food safety schemes*

Advice and recommendations on the establishment and development of food safety schemes (Schemes) is based on scientific data. Under the *Food Act 2003*, the Food Authority is required to conduct a risk assessment prior to the establishment of a Scheme. Surveys collect baseline or background data on industries or commodities which assist with this function.

2. *regulate the handling and sale of food subject to food safety schemes to ensure that it is safe and suitable for human consumption*

Surveys can assist in ensuring that regulations are effective and appropriate by determining if regulation has improved food safety in an industry and identifying areas that need improvement. Surveys can also assist in the evaluation and monitoring of regulations and industries by providing information on how an industry is currently performing.

3. *to encourage businesses engaged in the handling or sale of food to minimise food safety risks*

To help businesses minimise food safety risks it is important for the Food Authority to understand how different industries handle their food and identify areas that need improvement. Observational and food sampling surveys can gather this information. Once this is known, identified areas of concern can be addressed to improve food safety.

4. *to undertake or facilitate the education and training of persons to enable them to meet the requirements of the Food Standards Code and NSW Food Regulation*

Surveys help to identify areas where compliance with the Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code (the Code) can be improved. Data gathered from surveys provides a scientific basis for education and the development of training tools to improve compliance with the Code and NSW Food Regulation. Survey results can feed into information and education materials provided for local councils through the Food Regulation Partnership.

5. *to provide advice, information, community education and assistance in relation to matters connected with food safety or other interests of consumers in food*

Surveys provide scientific data that forms the basis for consumer education material. This may include conducting surveys such as temperature of domestic fridges, bacterial growth studies, presence of *Listeria* in high-risk foods to assist with vulnerable person education and distinguishing facts from fables.

Types of surveys

The Food Authority conducts various types of surveys. The main types include, but are not limited to:

Information gathering surveys

The aim of this type of survey is to collect background and/or compliance data on an industry or commodity. These surveys are conducted to:

- identify areas requiring improvement in an industry
- provide information to assist in the development of consumer education material or compliance tools.

Market analysis surveys

Market analysis surveys usually focus on retail outlets (For example, bakeries or take away shops) or retail products (For example, foods labelled 'allergen free', smallgoods). These surveys are conducted to:

- gather information on how particular industries perform
- assess compliance with the code
- assist in the development of industry and consumer education material
- identify areas of concern
- provide assurance to consumers that food produced in NSW is safe and suitable for consumption.

Verification surveys

Verification surveys are conducted to ensure foods that are covered under the Schemes or other regulatory options are compliant with their regulatory requirements. These surveys can test either chemical or microbiological agents and may include labelling compliance.

Research surveys

These surveys are used to research emerging issues and inform the regulatory process. They are conducted to assist in the:

- assessment of national or international emerging issues and potential impacts to the NSW food industry or consumers
- risk assessment of foods or industry sectors prior to the development of risk management options
- identification of potential risk management options, both regulatory (For example, food safety scheme) and non-regulatory
- evaluation of the effectiveness of both regulatory and non-regulatory risk management options.

National surveys

National surveys are conducted in conjunction with other jurisdictions and organised through the Surveillance, Evidence, Analysis Working Group (SEAWG). SEAWG consists of representatives from Australian state and territory food agencies, Commonwealth agencies and the New Zealand Ministry of Primary Industries. SEAWG aims to enhance the sharing of information for surveillance and monitoring activities in Australia and New Zealand. The Food Authority can either be the lead agency or a participant in national surveys. These surveys may be any of the above-mentioned types.

Labelling surveys

Throughout the Code there are requirements relating to the labelling and/or display of foods. Many of the foods included in the previously listed surveys will require some level of labelling. As such, where relevant, labelling surveys are conducted on foods sampled for other surveys. Separate labelling surveys may be conducted where issues are identified.

Deciding on a survey topic

High priority is given to surveys where:

- there is a new and emerging food safety issue of significance
- up-to-date information is required
- little information currently exists and is needed for food safety regulatory activities (either internally or through the Food Regulation Partnership with local council)
- information is needed to inform the regulatory development process.

Planning a survey

Before commencing a survey, the Food Authority ensures that the survey topic is appropriate and informative. This is done by examining available literature and knowledge.

The final step before commencing a survey is drafting a survey plan. The survey plan provides all the background information, sampling logistics and risk management strategy for the survey. Most surveys are not announced to industry prior to the commencement so that the results provide the Food Authority with a snapshot of current industry practices. In some cases, the decision to progress with a survey plan may not be made until after available literature and knowledge has been reviewed. Additionally, a survey may be halted due to the need to redirect resources to a more urgent issue or incident, such as a foodborne illness outbreak.

Risk management strategy

Risk management is an integral element of food safety management. While risk management is usually related to risk analysis, the concepts can be utilised for many food safety activities.

In respect to surveys, risk management is the process of reviewing and selecting potential actions based on the possible results (including labelling assessment) obtained from the survey.

The risk management strategy outlines the options that may help in managing the food safety risks associated with the outcomes of the survey. These will differ depending on the risk to human health. In some situations, there will be more than one option, and in these cases, they should be prioritised based on their effectiveness in reducing risk. Examples of potential risk management strategies include:

- the development of a guidance material,
- the development of a consumer education material,
- the development of the industry education material,
- follow up compliance/enforcement action, or
- the development of regulatory requirements.

The risk management strategy should address:

- proposed action in response to unsatisfactory results,
- responding to results from interstate or imported product, and
- information needs for local council to ensure consistency in responding to results.

Risk management strategies are developed on a survey-by-survey basis and are clearly defined prior to the commencement of any survey.

Interpreting survey results

Survey samples are not taken with the intention of immediate enforcement action, as they only provide a snapshot of the situation that existed at the time at which the sample was taken. Prior to enforcement action, follow up activities will occur. In general, results are compared to either the

Code or another relevant guideline. Where no guideline is available, information collected during the literature review may be used to assist in determining potential action scenarios.

Food found to contain unacceptable or potentially hazardous levels of microorganisms may be withdrawn or recalled. This decision to recall or withdraw is dependent on the contaminant and the food. This decision is made on a case-by-case basis. The majority of microbiological surveys involve ready-to-eat products. The Food Authority has published a guide to interpreting microbiological results for ready-to-eat food which is available at the Food Authority's website.

Foods found to contain additives or chemical contaminants (whether added or natural) in excess of regulatory limits or at levels that would exceed a reference health value may also be withdrawn or recalled. Again, this decision is dependent on the contaminant and the food and is made on a case-by-case basis. There are many pathways by which a contaminant can enter the food chain. This includes processing that may induce chemical changes in the food, raw materials that may contain naturally occurring toxicants, and packaging material that may leach into the food.

Factors that are taken into consideration when deciding action responses to sample results include:

- whether the issue is an immediate public health risk
- nature of pathogen/contaminant
- sample size
- number of samples analysed
- prevalence of pathogen/contaminant
- population group likely to consume the food
- likely quantities and distribution of the food
- shelf life of the food
- when and where the food was sampled
- whether the implicated products be traced
- the stage at which the contamination could have occurred
- the potential for other food to be affected
- wider implications for the industry
- the uncertainties about this result
- action being taken by other agencies or groups.

Communicating the survey results

At the conclusion of a survey, a report is produced and circulated to consumers (published on the Food Authority website), relevant industry bodies and other jurisdictions.

A report may also include recommendations, such as further or broader research, conducting a subsequent targeted investigation or running an education program.

More information

- View survey reports at www.foodauthority.nsw.gov.au/about-us/science/market-analysis
- NSW Food Authority. *Microbiological quality guide for ready-to-eat foods: a guide to interpreting microbiological results*.
- Visit www.foodauthority.nsw.gov.au
- Contact the Food Authority helpline:
 - Email food.contact@dpird.nsw.gov.au
 - Phone 1300 552 406

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