

Report of responses to :

NRLs questionnaire on comparative testing (proficiency testing) for E.coli / faecal coliform testing of bivalve molluscan shellfish, 2004

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Background

One of the tasks of NRLs is to : 'organise on a regular basis comparative tests between the various national laboratories responsible for the said analysis (Council Decision 1999/313/EC) ' . Comparative or proficiency testing is used to compare the performance of laboratories undertaking testing in order to help ensure comparability of test results and to identify, and improve, the performance of poorly performing laboratories. It is also an essential aspect of laboratory accreditation.

Discussion between the Commission and EU CRLs has focussed on the status of comparative testing among NRLs in Europe. The picture seems quite variable. It has been agreed that CRLs should seek to establish the current status of comparative testing among NRLs in their various fields. Therefore the CRL circulated a questionnaire to all designated NRLs in the field of microbiology of bivalve molluscs in February/March 2004. This questionnaire covered the analysis of bivalve molluscs for E.coli / faecal coliforms. Analysis of these organisms are an essential aspect of official controls for sanitation of bivalve molluscs. The questionnaire covered the monitoring of shellfish production areas (part B), and testing of end-product quality (part C), separately as different circumstances often apply. This is a summary report of the questionnaire responses comprising the main findings and consequential CRL recommendations. Annex 1 tabulates all questionnaire responses. Annex 2 is the circulated questionnaire.

Participation in questionnaire

Invitation of NRLs to participate in the questionnaire was based on established communication with the CRL and, for newly designated NRLs, particularly through participation in the 3rd workshop of NRLs in Rome 2004. All current EU Member States (MS) responded to the CRL invitation to attend the Rome workshop with the exception of Sweden. It is not clear to the CRL that Sweden has formally designated its NRL and this requires clarification. Sweden did not participate in this questionnaire. Norway (EFTA) has designated an NRL and participated in the questionnaire. NRLs have been designated for all accession countries joining the EU in May 2004 (AC1) with the exception of Malta and Cyprus. However, the laboratory designated by Hungary has recently withdrawn from this role. All AC1 countries were asked to participate in the Rome workshop with the exception of Hungary, Malta and Cyprus. However, Latvia and Lithuania did not respond to invitations to attend the NRLs workshop and were thus not asked

to participate in the questionnaire. Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey (AC2 countries) have designated NRLs. However, only Romania responded to the invitation to attend the NRLs workshop and was thus asked to complete the questionnaire. The list of NRLs invited to participate in the questionnaire was thus : Austria, Belgium/Luxembourg, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, UK.

Bulgaria, Cyprus, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Sweden and Turkey were not asked to participate in the questionnaire (for the reasons given above).

All NRLs asked to participate in the questionnaire returned responses to the CRL by the deadline of 18th March 2004. Thank you, an excellent response.

Questionnaire responses

Twenty NRLs (representing 21 countries) provided responses to the questionnaire. A tabulated summary of all responses is given at annex 1. The main findings are summarised below.

Autonomous regions

Seven NRLs reported autonomous or semi autonomous regions in their countries. 2 NRLs (Germany, UK) reported practices regarding bivalve mollusc sanitation to be the same in all autonomous regions. Five NRLs (Belgium/Luxembourg, Denmark, Finland, Portugal, Spain) reported different practices in autonomous regions. Of these 3 NRLs (Belgium/Luxembourg, Denmark, Spain) were aware of the precise practices in autonomous regions. Finland and Portugal reported that the NRL was not aware of the precise practices in autonomous regions. Autonomous or semi autonomous regions obviously pose a special challenge for the NRL in maintaining knowledge of the situation on the ground. Never-the-less the NRL is still responsible for the relevant activities (as described in Council Decision 1999/313/EC) in all regions/countries of the Member State.

Bivalve mollusc production

Fourteen NRLs reported commercial bivalve shellfish production areas in their Member State. Seven NRLs reported no commercial bivalve shellfish production areas in their Member State. Most of the Accession Countries responding, with the exception of Romania and Slovenia, reported no commercial bivalve shellfish production areas in their Member State. For details see annex 1.

Part B : Official testing of bivalve production areas

Analytical methods for E.coli/faecal coliforms : All 14 NRLs with commercial production areas in their Member State reported that standard laboratory methods were specified for official control analysis of production areas. In about half of these Member States the specified methods were not the same as those used by the NRL. In some Member States with autonomous regions methods varied between autonomous regions. The use of specified methods by testing laboratories varied according to Member States between legal requirement, competent authority requirement, NRL recommendation or own choice (see annex 1 for details).

Use of analytical methods by testing laboratories : All NRLs, with the exception of Spain (for some autonomous regions) and Norway, knew which laboratories undertook official testing of production areas in their Member State. All NRLs reported that testing laboratories used the specified methods. Spain did not have complete information on this question.

Comparative (proficiency testing) conducted by the NRL : Only 4 NRLs (Denmark, France, Italy, UK) reported performing proficiency testing among official testing laboratories for bivalve production areas. 10 NRLs (Belgium/Luxembourg, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Spain) reported that the NRL did not perform proficiency testing. In all 4 Member States where proficiency testing was performed it was compulsory for all official testing laboratories to participate. In 2 NRLs (Denmark and the UK) proficiency testing was performed in partnership with another Institute/EQA provider. In both cases the NRL reported full access to the test results. The number of laboratories participating in the proficiency testing programme varied from 1 to 19 (see annex 1). All proficiency testing samples distributed were specifically for shellfish testing. The number of distributions per year reported were 1 (Italy), 2 (France) and 3 (Denmark and UK). The type of samples distributed varied (see annex 1). Denmark, France and UK, but not Italy, reported a scoring system for laboratory performance. Denmark and the UK reported a follow up system for addressing poor performance. Problems reported in conducting proficiency testing included a lack of resources, and problems with preparation of suitable materials (see annex 1).

Reason for not conducting proficiency testing : Among the 10 NRLs in Member States with production areas who were not conducting proficiency testing various reasons were reported (see annex 1 for details). Mainly the problem quoted was a lack of resources to undertake the programme. A lack of experience was reported as a problem in 3 cases. Other problems reported were problems caused by laboratory reorganisation (Norway), only 1 or 2 laboratories undertaking testing (Belgium and Slovenia), and most testing laboratories already voluntarily participating in an EQA scheme (Portugal).

Forward plans : Among the 10 NRLs not conducting proficiency testing 8 reported plans to initiate proficiency testing within a 2 year period. 2 NRLs (Belgium and Portugal) reported no plans to initiate testing proficiency testing themselves. However both NRLs proposed approaches to ensure laboratories undertaking official testing were covered by a proficiency testing scheme (see comments in annex 1).

Part C : Official testing of end-product quality

Analytical methods for E.coli/faecal coliforms : Among the 20 NRLs responding 2 (Ireland and Portugal) reported that standard laboratory methods were not specified for official control analysis of end-product quality. Among the 18 Member States where methods were specified in 14 cases these were the same as those used by the NRL. The use of these specified methods by testing laboratories varied according to Member States between legal requirement, competent authority requirement, NRL recommendation or own choice (see annex 1 for details).

Use of analytical methods by testing laboratories : Eleven NRLs reported that they knew which laboratories undertook official testing of end products in their Member State. 5 NRLs reported partial information, 4 NRLs reported that they did not know which laboratories undertook testing. 14 NRLs reported that testing laboratories used the specified methods. Other NRLs reported partial use or didn't know.

Comparative (proficiency testing) conducted by the NRL : Six NRLs (Belgium/Luxembourg, Denmark, France, Italy, Spain (Madrid region), and UK) reported performing proficiency testing among official testing laboratories conducting end product quality testing. The other NRLs reported no proficiency testing was performed. Among the NRLs conducting proficiency testing laboratory participation was compulsory for all countries except the UK. 3 NRLs conducted proficiency testing in partnership and 3 did not (see annex 1). In 2 cases the NRL had full access to the results and in one case (UK) the NRL did not. The number of laboratories participating in the proficiency testing varied from 47 (Belgium/Luxembourg) to 6 (Denmark) – see annex 1 for full details. Samples distributed were specifically for shellfish analysis in 4 cases and for general food testing in 2 cases. The number of distributions per year varied between 1 and 3. The type of samples distributed varied (see annex 1). France, Spain, Denmark, and UK reported the development of a scoring system for laboratory performance. Denmark and the UK reported a follow up system for addressing poor performance. Problems reported in

conducting proficiency testing included a lack of resources, and problems with preparation of suitable materials. Other country specific issues are recorded in the footnotes at annex 1.

Reason for not conducting proficiency testing : Among the 14 NRLs not conducting proficiency testing various reasons were reported (see annex 1 for details). In 4 cases a lack of resources to undertake the programme was reported. A lack of experience was reported as a problem in 2 cases. In 2 cases proficiency testing was already undertaken by other parties. In 4 cases (Austria, Czech Republic, Estonia and Slovenia) only 1 laboratory (the NRL) was carrying out any analysis of bivalve molluscs. Other country specific problems or issues are recorded in the footnotes in annex 1.

Forward plans : Among the 14 NRLs not conducting proficiency testing 8 reported plans to initiate proficiency testing within a 2 year period. 3 NRLs reported, for various reasons, no plans to initiate testing proficiency testing themselves (see comments in annex 1).

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