

Activities of the state in guaranteeing the safety of foodstuffs of vegetable origin

Do pesticides and pollutants threaten our food?

Report of the National Audit Office to the Riigikogu. Tallinn, 4 February 2009

Summary of Audit Results

Use of chemicals has become an inseparable part of agricultural production and food processing. Some of the hazardous substances, however, remain in the food and may pose a threat to people's health. The HACCP system applied by the food business operator must ensure that any food sold is safe for people and does not contain hazardous substances in excess of the permitted limits.

All food control supervision activities were assigned to the Veterinary and Food Board (VFB) in 2007 in order to make controlling food safety more efficient. The National Audit Office checked how the food safety supervisory agency collects information about chemical pollutants, how reliable such information is and whether or not appropriate measures are guaranteed in order to react to any breaches of norms.

The audit also analysed the use of food additives since use of additives in excess of the norms can also be treated as pollution.

In the course of the audit, the National Audit Office ordered independent analyses to test the pesticides and other pollutants found in foodstuffs. The purpose of the tests was to ascertain that the tested foodstuffs do not contain more pollutants than could be expected on the basis of the results of food control by the state.

The Institute of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences of the Estonian University of Life Sciences took part in the audit as an expert and their work has been appended to this audit. People have the right to safe food and relevant information. The duty of food business operators is to ensure that unsafe food is not sold. Every year, the state allocates more than 100 million kroons for food and fodder supervision (incl. 2 million kroons for surveillance of pollutants). It should be possible to obtain a good overview of the safety of the foodstuffs sold and their compliance with EU norms with this money.

In the opinion of the National Audit Office, the results of the Veterinary and Food Board show the food safety situation in respect of pesticides as better than it actually is. The audit showed that samples which are not directly associated with testing food safety are recorded in the food surveillance results, the eating habits of the Estonian people are not considered in the assessment of samples and the capability of laboratories in ascertaining hazardous substances is low.

The key conclusions drawn from the audit are as follows:

- The Veterinary and Food Board has carried out control according to the food safety requirements of the European Union. However, a significant number of samples for domestic surveillance of pesticides were not taken for the purpose of food testing only. One-third of the 365 pesticide samples taken in 2007 were samples of the Plant Production Inspectorate (PPI), which were taken to inspect the use and quality of plant protection products, fodder and organic products in addition to testing food safety. The inclusion of PPI samples means that surveillance results show the situation of food safety as better than it actually is. Food pollution would be 7% and not 3% if we only considered the food control carried out by the VFB in association with pesticides.
- Food tests carried out during the audit showed that foodstuffs of vegetable origin may be more polluted with pesticides and other pollutants than expected. Pollution in excess of norms was found at least twice as often as during surveillance by the state. Since the results were found before 1 September 2008 when a different practice was used in the application of limits, then the test results did not give the supervision agency a clear signal that additional processing and assessment of threats may be required.
- Supervision of food safety is incapable of assessing the threats arising from pollutants. Since the VFB does not have a scientific overview of the eating habits of Estonians, then it is impossible to make a justified decision whether food is unsafe for consumers and should be removed from stores when pollution in excess of norms is ascertained. The VFB has not removed any food polluted with pesticides from the sales network in the last two years.
- The ability of laboratories to ascertain pollutant residue is low. Estonian laboratories are able to ascertain the residue of 20% of the pesticides registered in the European Union (approximately 1100). Investing into methods of analysis is difficult and mutual competition means that the number of analyses carried out by state laboratories has decreased, equipment is underused and laboratories do not have any security about the future.
- Reforming the areas of food safety supervision was not completed. Supervision of food safety was assigned to the VFB, but primary food production control remained outside its direct supervision. Control in this area is carried out by the Plant Production Inspectorate, but it has no right to inspect performance of the requirements associated with food safety.

- Control results do not reach consumers in a format they can understand, yet the system is supposed to protect their rights. State agencies are not publishing the results of pesticide surveillance and food research regularly and they are not increasing the awareness of consumers systematically so that people could make their own choices. The annual control programme reports submitted to the European Commission are not aimed at ordinary consumers (they are in foreign languages and contain many specific tables).

Response of the Minister of Agriculture: The draft approaches the area of pesticide residue, which is very important from the viewpoint of food safety, in great detail. The issues raised in the draft require thorough discussion and consideration, and the recommendations give help in the preparation of development plans and planning future actions, especially allocation of funds from the state budget.

The Minister of Agriculture also made some additional comments about the draft report. The National Audit Office would like to thank the Ministry of Agriculture for its thorough work with the draft. The specifying paragraphs and explanations contained in the comments have been considered in the final text of the report in order to inform the readers better.

Response of the Director General of the Veterinary and Food Board: The Veterinary and Food Board supports the opinion of the Ministry of Agriculture and considers the recommendations of the National Audit Office in planning its future work and development activities.

Tarmo Olgo
Director of Audit of the Performance Audit Department