

Research leads to safer seafood

Cathy Webb

We all know how important food safety is, it simply goes without saying. As producers of high quality seafood product we work hard to ensure our products are safe. This effort pays off and has led to our industry earning a reputation of being suppliers of safe seafood across the many markets we supply. However, the hard work must continue as maintaining this reputation is critical.

Assisting the seafood industry in the food safety space is the Seafood Standards Council, providing guidance and advice and working with the regulator to develop appropriate standards, and the industry-driven seafood safety research being undertaken through a dedicated seafood food safety research programme called the Safe New Zealand Seafood Programme (Safe NZ Seafood).

Safe NZ Seafood was established in 2007 by a consortium of research providers. It is led by Cawthron Institute, along with input from ESR, Plant and Food Research, and AgResearch. The programme is funded by MBIE with contribution from the seafood industry and is focused on research in the areas relating to harmful algal bloom technologies, marine toxin chemistry and toxicology, virus monitoring and infectivity, and bacterial contamination.

The programme has had a number of successes over the years, including the development of rapid chemical test methods for biotoxins, molecular detection tools for norovirus, faster methods for detecting vibrio bacteria, and significant progress in understanding biofilm formation by

listeria monocytogenes, to name just a few.

Not surprisingly, the Australian seafood industry is also focused on food safety and I recently attended the Australian SafeFish partnership meeting as an independent observer. SafeFish is a partnership between the seafood industry, research providers and the Australian government and is funded by the Fisheries Research and Development Institute (FRDC) and industry stakeholders. SafeFish either undertakes research directly or uses its funding to leverage other research funding available in Australia.

The purpose of attending SafeFish is to strengthen the collaboration between New Zealand and Australia where there are common interests relating to food safety. Issues of interest to New Zealand on the SafeFish agenda include marine biotoxin research in rock lobster, standards relating to



methyl-mercury and histamine currently being progressed through Codex, ciguatera fish poisoning, the vibrio group of bacteria, harmonisation of retail producer schemes, food fraud and treatment of tuna with carbon monoxide.

The primary benefit of this collaboration is in utilising the expertise both countries have across the different science disciplines and working together in areas where there is shared interest. While the Australians may have access to a larger pool of funding for research, like New Zealand, it not an ever-expanding pool, and therefore avoiding duplication of effort in areas of seafood safety research is of mutual benefit to both countries. I look forward to reporting further in this space.

– *Cathy Webb is the seafood standards manager at Seafood NZ and the executive officer of the Seafood Standards Council.*

