

The MAFF Programme on Food Authenticity

The term food authenticity is one which is not easily defined, but in the context of MAFF's programme it refers to food which has been misdescribed or not correctly labelled and is therefore not "of the nature or substance or quality demanded by the purchaser". Misdescription usually takes one or more of the following forms:

- Incorrectly labelled treatment;
- Mislabelled geographic/biological origin;
- Ingredient substitution in order to pass off food as a better quality product;
- Product extension in order to pass off food as a better quality product.

MAFF's programme on food authenticity can be divided into two parts:-

R&D

For a number of years, MAFF has funded research projects to develop methods suitable for checking that food is correctly described, though it was only in 1991 that a food authenticity R&D programme was formally established and included in the MAFF R&D Requirements Document. Each year the Ministry spends over £1 million on food authenticity research.

Surveillance

The MAFF's Working Party on Food Authenticity (WPFA) is one of the 11 working parties that monitor the UK's food supply to assess its safety and adequacy, and in this case whether foods have been correctly described and are not adulterated. The WPFA, which was established in 1992, co-ordinates the work on food authenticity and in particular oversees the national surveys.

It has developed a working system where authenticity issues are prioritised so that resources are available for the most important issues. It evaluates the methodology to be used for surveys to ensure that it is robust and any limitations quantified. It draws up sampling and analytical protocols for surveys to ensure these are carried out in a standardised manner. Where gaps are identified in methodology, these can be co-ordinated within the priorities of the R&D programme.

Surveys are carried out on a national basis to assess whether food sold in the UK is properly labelled. The findings of this work are made publicly available, through the MAFF/DH Food Safety Information Bulletin, and other publications. To date the WPFA has carried out six surveys to investigate:

- the species authenticity of coated white fish products;

- the authenticity of soluble coffee;
- the authenticity of dried durum wheat pasta;
- the authenticity of four single seed vegetable oils (corn, palm, sunflower and peanut);
- whether fresh meat and poultry has been previously frozen and thawed;
- the undeclared irradiation of foods (herbs and species, fruit and vegetables, raw poultry, shrimps and prawns and liquid egg).

A further three surveys are currently underway to investigate:

- the substitution of whisky brands sold through licensed premises (on-trade);
- the level of added water in cured meat products;
- adulteration of orange juice.
