

## Learning from the past: Researchers develop a model for food risk communication

14 April 2011

Food safety is key for public health and thus the communication of food safety and risk is essential. However, incidents can easily become crises through constant public scrutiny by the media, warranting an effective model for crisis management. A paper published in the journal *Public Understanding of Science* compares two country experiences and distils the essentials for successful food risk communication.

Lessons from two highly-publicised incidents involving dioxin contamination in Belgium (1999) and Ireland (2008) have allowed researchers from Kansas State University to learn from past mistakes and develop a model for effective crisis management emphasising three key factors: prompt communication, acknowledgement of risk, and stigma control.

Thought to cause cancer in humans, dioxins reached the food supply in both incidents through the contamination of fat used from animal feed. Researchers compared the poor crisis management during the Belgian dioxin crisis in summer 1999 with the successful management of the Irish dioxin crisis in winter 2008. In both cases, the food and agricultural industries relied on crisis management activities of the federal government to limit adverse public reaction, yet the outcomes of each incident were stark contrasts.

In the case of poor management, Belgian authorities delayed informing the public of the dioxin contamination once confirmed, failed to acknowledge the true risk to consumers, and lost the trust of the public and the media regarding the dioxin contamination. Where Belgian authorities failed in 1999, Irish authorities triumphed with the Food Safety Authority of Ireland quickly working to confirm the presence of dioxins, promptly communicating the risk levels and safety measures initiated, and controlling the public messaging via labelling mandates and timely public announcements.

The failure of the Belgian government to include the interest and concerns of the public in the decision-making process led to widespread distrust in the government by both consumers and importing nations. In contrast, prompt and detailed communication by Irish authorities maintained the trust of the public and other nations throughout the crisis management.

The analysis of the management of the two crises in addition to a subsequent review of crisis management literature, led to the development of an effective three-factor crisis management model: prompt communication, risk acknowledgment, and stigma control. Such as model may insulate industries associated with the crisis against damaged reputations, promote trust and respect for government authorities, and inform consumers about their own food risk.

For further information, see:



[Jacob CJ, Lok C, Morley K & Powell DA. \(2011\). Government management of two media-facilitated crises involving dioxin contamination of food. Public Understanding of Science 20:261-269.](#)