

Communication flow to and between international alert systems and stakeholders

When an EU or EEA/EFTA country is faced with a foodborne disease outbreak that may potentially also affect other countries, information concerning the outbreak needs to be communicated to the concerned countries within the EU, and in some situations also beyond. This document is meant as a quick reference guide and provides an overview of the alert systems to consider, in addition to a schematic outline of the flow of information in an outbreak situation. This information is found in the table and figure in the accompanying documents. The document is in no way meant to dictate how reporting should work, but simply tries to outline a logical scenario for reporting and interaction between all the involved reporting systems.

National alert systems

Many FWD incidents are first detected and investigated at the local level by local health and food safety authorities. Major events are reported to the national level, which assess them for reporting internationally in the legal or voluntary alert systems.

International alert systems

Legally binding alert systems

The EU (and affiliated countries) has official (legally binding) inter-member state alert systems which are of importance when considering foodborne outbreaks:

- **the Early Warning and Response System** (EWRS <https://ewrs.ecdc.europa.eu>) for communication of known disease threats that may need the installment of control measures in order to improve coordination of public health measures in the EU
- **the Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed** (RASFF http://ec.europa.eu/food/food/rapidalert/index_en.htm) for communicating known health treats associated with food and feed on the market.

EU member states are also legally obligated under the International Health Regulations (IHR <http://www.who.int/ihr/en/>) to report outbreak of possible international significance to WHO and this includes outbreaks of foodborne illness.

Voluntary FWD alert systems

ECDC-EPIS http://external.ecdc.europa.eu/EPIS_FWD/

The FWD informal urgent inquiry system is being used within the FWD network. This alert system has a number of features that make it particularly suited for communication of information relating to foodborne outbreaks in Europe.

- It has existed for over ten years and has a history of success. It has been shaped by the member states as it has grown out of the former disease specific network *Enter-Net* where it has proven to be of value in a number of outbreak settings over the years.
- It is targeted directly at the persons doing outbreak investigation work in the member states and it involves both epidemiologists and microbiologists, which is important as cooperation and a mutual understanding between the lab- and epi-side is generally necessary for the successful handling of foodborne outbreaks.
- It is meant for informal communication of signals and early confidential information within the network and is thus well suited as an investigation tool and preliminary investigative step even before deciding if it is an international incident.
- The recent migration to the newly developed EPIS IT platform means that information is now more easily accessible. Developing associated tools within EPIS may improve communication and coordination.
- The EPIS platform for FWD experts in the EU provides a space where they can share information regarding potential FWD events that are of importance nationally or internationally. For 'normal' working activities this includes the ability to share information in order to assess the importance of unusual increases in FWD pathogens at the country and at the EU and international level. During public health crisis, especially those of EU or international importance, it facilitates early information sharing and stimulates epidemiological and microbiological discussion for a coordinated investigation into such events among public health institutes of the various Member States. In this way EPIS encourages a coordinated approach to identifying the origin of contamination among Member States and stimulates frequent and updated risk assessments for public health.

EPIS and EWRS as complementary systems

The Early Warning and Response System (EWRS) and EPIS are designed as complementary communication platforms with the overall goal of ensuring a coordinated response in the assessment and management of any public health event on European level. While EPIS is designed as the technical level communication platform in the **risk assessment** phase, EWRS functions as a policy level communication platform for the coordination of measures between EU MSs in the **risk management** phase. Additionally, EWRS is a system which is used for mandatory notification at the EU level, whereas EPIS participation is strictly voluntary (see Figure 1 below)

INFOSAN http://www.who.int/foodsafety/fs_management/infosan/en/

The International Food Safety Authorities Network (INFOSAN) is a joint initiative between WHO and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). This is a global network which includes 177 member states. Each has a designated INFOSAN emergency contact point for communication between national food safety authorities and the INFOSAN secretariat regarding urgent events. Recognizing that food safety is often a shared responsibility, countries are also asked to identify focal points in other ministries or relevant agencies to receive INFOSAN communications.

The network aims to:

- Promote the rapid exchange of information during food safety related events
- Share information on important food safety related issues of global interest
- Promote partnership and collaboration between countries
- Help countries strengthen their capacity to manage food safety risks

PULSENET <http://www.pulsenetinternational.org/>

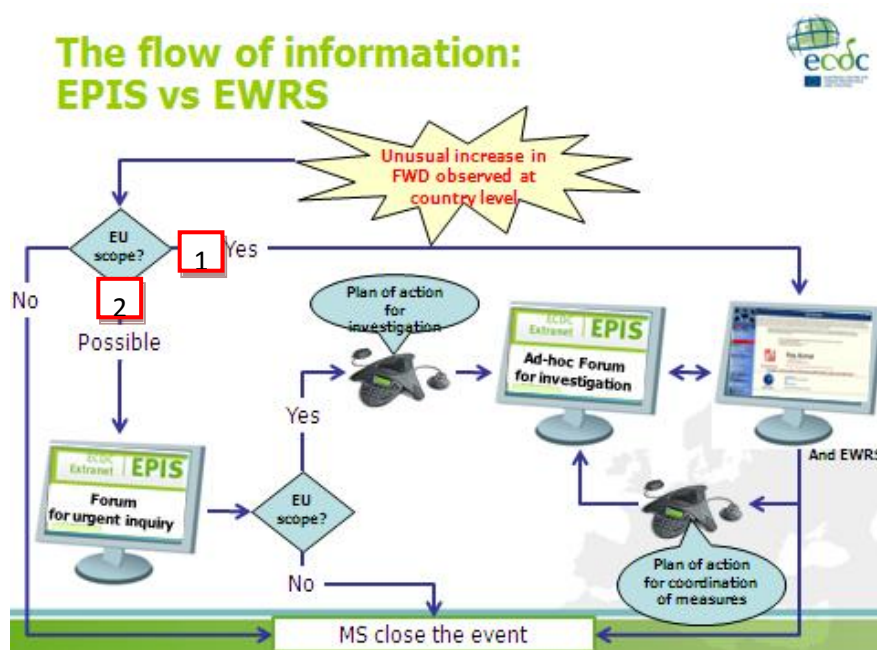
PulseNet International is a network of regional and national laboratory networks dedicated to tracking foodborne infections world-wide. Each laboratory utilizes standardized genotyping methods, sharing information in real-time. As PulseNet Europe is currently undergoing restructuring, European countries do not have easy access to PulseNet International.

FBVE net <http://www.noronet.nl/fbve/>

FBVE net is a network of virologists and epidemiologists in 13 European countries existing since 1999, sharing surveillance and research data on enteric virus infections, focusing mainly on norovirus. The work of the network has been supported through three different EU projects, of which the last one finished in 2009. Presently the FBVE network is in the process of being merged into the NoroNet network. The network maintains a shared database accessible via the Internet for data entry and sharing and analysis

Annex

Figure 1 Flow of information between EPIS and EWRS during an international FWD event



1. Should the investigation of an event by a MS conclude that the event meets EWRS criteria, then the MS notifies through EWRS, a teleconference takes place if coordination of measures is needed, the EPIS ad-hoc forum is used if further risk assessment discussion is needed (for epi-investigation, surveillance etc). Summaries are then fed back to the EWRS and it loops between the two according to risk assessment (EPIS) vs. risk management (EWRS) focus.
2. If the first investigation of an event by a MS is not conclusive as to whether there is an EU dimension, a rapid inquiry is sent through EPIS. If needed, this can be followed by a teleconference, to plan for further verification and investigation and followed-up by an EWRS notification when criteria are met.