

2012

**PROJECT PREPARATION GRANT
(PPG)**

**Contract STDF/PPG/344
Final Report**

**Establishment of a Regional Virtual Food Inspection School in Central
America and Dominican Republic**

Ana Marisa Cordero P.

Contract STDF/PPG/344

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PPG Title	Establishment of a Regional Virtual Food Inspection School in Central America and Dominican Republic
Budget requested from STDF	US\$30,000
Full name and contact details of the requesting organization(s)	Inter American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA) Apdo. Postal 55-2200 , San Jose Vázquez de Coronado San Isidro 11101 Costa Rica
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I. Background:

Central American countries are working hard to open, keep or expand their extra-regional export markets for food products, as well as their internal and regional markets for food. These efforts are being made within economic integration and custom union schemes that now include Panama and the Dominican Republic. Such integration initiatives make it imperative to have harmonized food safety regulations as well as protocols for conducting risk management tasks, particularly food safety control and inspection procedures. Although much has been done regarding harmonization of regional norms and regulations on food safety, little has been achieved in terms of similar harmonization of food inspection procedures that are essential to facilitate intra- and extra-regional trade. The latter, in turn, depends more every day on the capacity of exporting countries to demonstrate a level of proficiency in food safety high enough to satisfy the requirements of ever more demanding importing countries and buyers. Inspection—as an intrinsic, critical and highly visible part of a nation’s food safety control system—plays a major role in opening or barring market access for the region.

In addition, the Central American region—including Panama and, by association, the Dominican Republic— has a high incidence of foodborne diseases that very likely represent huge economic and social costs. Such costs are very difficult to calculate or even estimate because national epidemiological surveillance systems are very weak or nonexistent, something that precludes an identification of the main etiological agents of foodborne disease. To a large extent, food safety in the region has not been a governmental priority in the past, and thus food inspection at the primary production level—the farm, ponds, collection and packing houses and the like—as well as at food processing, preparation and serving establishments is often ineffective and almost always obsolete (i.e., based not on risk and process but on end-product sampling and cosmetic considerations). Decentralization of food inspection, in turn, has allowed personnel with little or no specific training in the fundamentals of food safety to be regional, city, town, village, or customs inspectors.

In view of the above, the formation of food inspectors having a common, fundamental technical background on food science—sufficient to allow them to identify microbiological, chemical and physical foodborne risks so as to be able to conduct food inspection based on risk, as required by the Codex Alimentarius—and using procedures that are harmonized throughout the region,

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would constitute a driver for change regarding the safety of foods for export as well as internal consumption. Furthermore, a professional inspector cadre would enable the countries of the region to improve public health, would help modernize their regulations and would contribute to achieve eventual recognition from trading partners concerning the region's intention and capacity to ensure the safety of its food exports. Strengthening the competence and skills of food inspectors will contribute to facilitate trade in food products through the recognition—within and outside the region—of the region's capacity and commitment to provide safe, wholesome food products to the market.

II. Objectives:

- **General:** To develop the project document for the Establishment of the First Regional Virtual Food Inspection School in the Americas, to train food inspectors in areas of knowledge necessary to conduct inspections based on risk and thus enhance the safety of the food supply.
- **Specific:**
 - To form a supporting International Advisory Group constituted by universities and food safety control agencies from the United States, Spain, Mexico, Central America, and Argentina.
 - To promote the concept of a virtual food inspection school throughout the region and ensure the adherence to the project by local universities.
 - To design the Project for the establishment of the virtual school.
 - To present the full Project to the STDF for funding.

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III. General Project Preparation Activities:

1. Academic Advisory Group:

An Academic Advisory Group was formed with representatives of universities from the United States, Spain, Mexico, and Costa Rica. A representative from the Food Security Agency in Santa Fe, Argentina (Agencia Santafesina de Seguridad Alimentaria) was also invited to integrate the group.

The Academic Advisory Group

- Dr. Rolando Flores, Director, Food Processing Center; University of Nebraska, Lincoln (USA)
- Dr. Ricardo Molins, Head, Agricultural Health and Food Safety Program, IICA
- Ana Carmela Velásquez, Director, Center of Science and Food Technology (CITA), University of Costa Rica
- Ileana Leandro, Head, Food Industry Program, National Institute of Learning (INA), Costa Rica
- Dr. Marcos Monteverde, Secretary, Food Security Agency, Santa Fe, Argentina
- Dr. Juan Antonio Serra, Food Technology Department, Universidad Politécnica de Valencia (Spain)
- Dr. María Salud Rubio, Professor, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México
- Dr. Marco Sanchez; Food Safety Specialist, IICA

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Two meetings of the Academic Advisory Group were held. The first meeting took place on August 19 – 21, 2011 in Miami, United States, to discuss the school concept and the objectives of the proposal. In addition, the modality of operation of the school and the responsibilities of the Academic Advisory Group were defined. The second meeting focused on the development of the academic curriculum for the future inspectors and on the contents of the project document; this second meeting took place in San Jose, Costa Rica.

2. Visit to Central American and Dominican Republic Governments and Academic Partners

In order to explain the overall concept of the initiative, meetings with academic centers and government representatives in charge of food safety issues in Central America and Dominican Republic were scheduled. The support and interest in being part of the initiative were expressed by all parties visited.

- a. Costa Rica: At the beginning of the process, the Government of Costa Rica and the University of Costa Rica expressed their interest through letters of support for the project from three Ministries (attached). Additionally, a meeting with the Vice-Ministers of Foreign Trade, Agriculture, and Health were held. Costa Rica agreed to present the project to the STDF on behalf of the eight countries involved.
- b. El Salvador: September 27-28, 2011. Meetings were held with the Minister of Agriculture and the Directors of Plant Health and Livestock; the Vice-Minister of Health and the Director of the Environmental Health Unit, as well as representatives from the School of Agronomy of the University Jose Matías Delgado.
- c. Nicaragua: October 27- 28, 2011. Meetings were held with representatives of the Directorate of Sanitary Regulations; the Director of Protection and Agricultural Health and representatives of the University of Leon (UNAN Leon). The Ministers could not be visited because they were engaged in electoral activities.
- d. Panama: October 31- November 1, 2011. Meetings were held with representatives of the University of Panama, with the Minister of Agriculture, the Directors of Animal and Plant Health, and the General Manager of the Panamanian Food Security Authority.

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- e. Dominican Republic: November 3-4, 2011. Meetings were held with representatives of the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Health, the Autonomous University of Santo Domingo, and ISA University.
- f. Visits to Belize, Guatemala, and Honduras were postponed until early 2012 due to political reasons.

IV. Conclusions:

- Government representatives from all the countries visited agreed about the importance of having a regional food inspection school as a way to protect public health, harmonize regulations and technical criteria regarding inspection techniques, and strength the Central America Custom Union process.
- Universities in Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Dominican Republic, Panama, and El Salvador fully supported the initiative and are committed to the project.
- Strengthening the competence and skills of food inspectors will contribute to facilitate trade in food products.
- All inputs and information gathered as a result of the various meetings were used to enrich and develop the final project proposal.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Academic curriculum

Appendix 2: Letters of support from each of the Universities supporting this proposal.

Appendix 3: Project proposal

Appendix 4: Will be send by IICA

Appendix 5: List of contacts