Establishment of Food Safety Agency, as one of the multiple steps to be taken for effective implementation of measures set by the Strategic Road Map, will play significant role in adapting the food safety system of the Republic of Azerbaijan with the requirements of international standards.
The food safety control system of the Republic of Azerbaijan significantly differs from international requirements and best practices. This system does not ensure complete food safety in the country. Food safety system of Azerbaijan needs to meet the requirements of the European Union and respective international organizations. It is also necessary to increase quality and safety of products and remove duplication in activities of different bodies involved in control of food safety in the country.

At present, State Committee for Standardization, Metrology and Patent is in charge of control over compliance of production of certified products with relevant standards, while the Ministry of Economy exercises control over compliance of products in the market with requirements of standards. Besides, several government authorities exert control over food stuffs at production level. State Phytosanitary Service is responsible for control of plants and plant products, while the State Veterinary Control Service exercises control over live animals and animal products. Furthermore, raw stuff necessary for production, as well as, overall production process are controlled by the Ministry of Health and State Committee for Standardization, Metrology and Patent. Once the product entered into the market, control power is passed to the State Service for Antimonopoly Policy and Consumer Rights’ Protection under the Ministry of Economy. At the same time, Ministry of Health exercises control over food stuffs in the market.

As presented above, food safety control system in Azerbaijan does not fully comply with up-to-date standards and many functions are duplicated by other government bodies. In particular, majority of food safety standards, sanitary and phytosanitary norms and rules had been developed during the Soviet Union, and they need to be improved according to the requirements of international standards. Inspection mechanisms during import-export transactions are among the areas that need improvements. It is necessary to bring procedures of inspection of products into line with the requirements of the World Trade Organization (WTO).

“Strategic Road Map on Production and Processing of Agricultural Products” approved by the Decree of 6 December 2016 of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, sets a goal to remove parallelism in obligations and functions of various government bodies involved in food safety control and build an effective regulation system. In this regard, establishment of the Food Safety Agency of the Republic of Azerbaijan by the Presidential Decree on “Additional measures to improve the food safety system in the Republic of Azerbaijan”, dated 10 February, 2017, will contribute to the improvement of food safety system in the country.

The Food Safety Agency will facilitate the implementation of the following activities from 2018 onwards:
1. Normative regulation on safety of food stuffs (preparation and approval of sanitary norms and rules, as well as hygiene regulations) and analysis of risks in the Republic of Azerbaijan;

2. Carry out hygienic certification works, including issue quality certificate for food stuffs exported to foreign countries, as specified by the legislation;

3. Exercise public control in all stages of production in the field based on “farm to table” principle and in view of the risk levels.

It is also worth to note that Food Safety Commission was established under chairmanship of Ali Ahmadov, Deputy Prime Minister, in order to ensure operation of the agency as specified in the Presidential Decree. Minister of Economy of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Minister of Health of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Minister of Agriculture of the Republic of Azerbaijan, chairman of the State Committee for Standardization, Metrology and Patent of the Republic of Azerbaijan, chairman of the State Committee for Property Issues of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the chairman of the State Food Safety Agency of the Republic of Azerbaijan were appointed as the members of this Commission. The Commission is ordered, within 4 months, to submit its proposals on draft charter, structure and general number of staff of the Agency, to the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan. According to the Presidential Decree, January 1, 2018 is set as the expiry date of Commission’s operation.

According to the mentioned Decree, within 6 months, the draft law on “Food safety” based on the best international experience should be presented to the President by the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Azerbaijan. Besides, the Cabinet of Ministers, together with the Agency will develop the draft of the “State program on food safety control in the Republic of Azerbaijan in 2018 – 2025” to present it to the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan. The following tasks will be set as the priorities in the draft of the state program:

- to ensure compliance of normative legal acts on food safety control, including standards, phytosanitary and veterinary norms and regulations with the International Plant Protection Convention (IPPC), as well as with the standards and requirements of Codex Alimentarius Commission and World Organisation for Animal Health;

- to ensure compliance of food products conformity evaluation (approval) system with relevant international requirements;

- to conduct risk grouping of food products (lower, medium and high risk groups) and identify risk evaluation criteria based on best international experience;
- to improve control system of genetically modified organisms and their reproductions;
- develop and implement control system and mechanisms for production of food products based on “farm to table” approach and in view of risk levels associated with each product;
- strengthen staff’s capacity in the field of food safety;
- strengthen and modernize material–technical supply with regard to safety of food products (expand laboratory network and international accreditation of laboratories).

It is also worth to mention that Presidential Decree on “Additional measures to improve the food safety system in the Republic of Azerbaijan”, dated 10 February, 2017 enabled identification of precise division of power to remove duplication among various government bodies. According to the Decree, the Ministry of Agriculture of the Republic of Azerbaijan will be responsible for state control in the fields of veterinary, plant protection and quarantine (excluding the products of animal and plant origin and raw stuffs), while the control of safety of food products, such as the products of animal and plant origin and raw stuffs will be exercised by the Food Safety Agency. In order to remove the duplication of powers of government authorities and institutions involved in control in this field, the Cabinet of Ministers, together with the Ministry of Agriculture and the Agency will prepare proposals within 4 months to present them to the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan.

Besides, State Committee on Property Issues, together with the Agency should resolve issues such as material-technical supply for organization of Agency’s functioning, and take an inventory of state property of other public authorities and institutions capable to serve the Agency to implement its operation and prepare proposals on transfer of that property to the Agency to submit the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan within 5 months.

At the same time, it should be noted that the Food Safety Agency will be Azerbaijan’s National Focal Point for Codex Alimentarius Commission, which will further strengthen the activities in this field.

With the establishment of Food Safety Agency, which will exercise single control function, food safety control system and its transparency will be further improved, while duplication and ineffective organization will be removed. Besides, Establishment of the Food Safety Agency will also facilitate successful implementation of actions listed in the “Strategic Road Map on Production and Processing of Agricultural Products”.

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