



# Food recall – are you prepared? A snapshot of the Australian food industry

Words by Fiona Fleming and Peter McGee

Product safety is the foundation of the food and beverage industry.

Australians enjoy one of the safest food supply chains in the world, but food and beverage companies recognise that steps must be taken to make it even safer. Ensuring the safety of products – and maintaining the confidence of consumers – is the single most important goal of our industry.

Food safety has always been important for Australia's food producers, manufacturers, and marketers. Our consumers have a legitimate expectation that their food is safe, and our local and international reputations depend upon excellence in food safety outcomes. Australia has an enviable reputation and track record, features that we must protect, nurture, and enhance.

Food safety incidents quickly attract both local and international attention. Food safety, like workplace health and safety, is a business

essential. The efficient response to a food safety incident is critical and companies need to be prepared with systems and processes in place.

No company can completely eradicate the possibility of a product safety issue and in the event that a food recall is required, a robust and practised recall and crisis management plan will limit the impact of a recall event.

Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) provide regular updates on reported food related recalls in Australia. Recent trends show an increase in the number of recalls, with 96 and 109 reported in 2019 and 2020, respectively (Figure 1). The 10-year average (2011-2020) increased from 71 to 76 recalls per year.<sup>1</sup>

According to FSANZ, most food recalls in the period between 2011 and 2020 were due to undeclared allergens (42%) and microbial contamination (26%).

In September 2020, the AIFST supported by Victual collaborated to complete an industry survey into the preparedness of the food and beverage industry for product recall. This survey was conducted as a follow up to a 2016 survey to gain an insight into trends and changes in product recall preparedness over the four-year intervening period.

The recall survey consisted of 55 companies (compared to 46 companies in 2016) of various sizes in the food, beverages, and grocery industry. The types of businesses varied with over half (52.8%) being manufactures of retail ready finished products, compared with 49% in 2016. The total number of sites represented by the 2020 survey was over 1,000.

## Food recall preparedness

Preparing for a food recall should entail more than simply populating a recall plan template downloaded from the internet and filing it for

future use. The recall plan is a critical tool that needs to be understood by those who will be called upon to use it, regularly reviewed to ensure it is relevant and tested to ensure it is effective.

FSANZ provides guidance via their Food Industry Recall Protocol and associated templates. These are useful tools to help prepare but should be supported by the necessary training and testing to make sure they will be effective when called upon.

Responses to the survey indicate that survey respondents understand the importance of preparing effectively for a recall with 96% advising they have a recall plan in place. This compares with 100% of respondents in the 2016 survey. It is not sufficient to have a plan in place – regular review is also important – 85% advised their recall plan had been reviewed within the past 12 months, compared with 89% in 2016.

Mock recalls are essential in testing the recall plan that the business has in place. Mock recalls can prepare the business for when an actual recall or withdrawal occurs. 90% of survey respondents advised they conduct mock recalls to test the food recall plan compared to 87% in 2016. 85% of the 2020 survey respondents conducted a mock recall at least annually, slightly less than in 2016.

### Food recall resources

Resources within the business to handle a recall or withdrawal are crucial to a successful outcome. The establishment and support of a food recall team/committee is important to ensure the business is prepared to deal with a food recall. In relation to their food recall teams, survey respondents advised:

- 90% have a food recall committee
- 79% agreed or strongly agreed that their recall committee is ready for a recall
- 80% agreed or strongly agreed that the food recall committee has access to resources to assist with planning and conducting a food recall

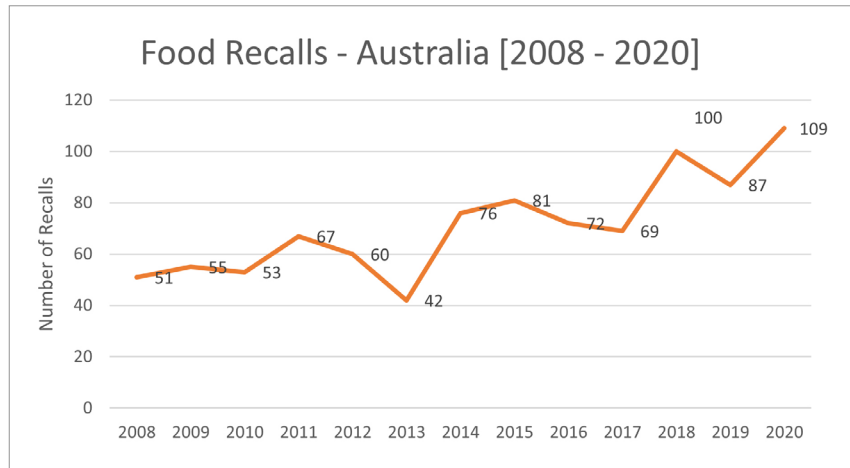


Figure 1. Food Recalls – Australia [2008 – 2020]. Source: FSANZ.



Figure 2. Resources which would be helpful in the event of a food recall.

- 50% had trained their recall team in the past 12 months, and
- 80% advised that the training was carried out in house by one of the team or an external consultant.
- Crisis communication specialists
- Social media specialists
- Product retrieval logistics support
- Legal advice, and
- Call centre operations.

Figure 2 shows the resources which survey respondents considered would be helpful in the event of a food recall.

This is just a snapshot of the insights collected from the 2020 industry survey. The full report is available on the AIFST website.

### References

1. <https://www.foodstandards.gov.au/industry/foodrecalls/recallstats/Pages/default.aspx>

Fiona Fleming is the CEO of AIFST. Peter McGee is the Co-Founder of Victual ([victual.com.au](http://victual.com.au)).

### Food recall response

There is significant guidance documentation available to food businesses on the FSANZ website. The FSANZ Recall Plan template and Food Industry Recall Protocol were known to 91% and 86% of survey respondents.

However, the survey confirmed that respondents understand the need for specialist resources in recall scenarios. The types of services can vary, but the majority of respondents could see the need for specialist services such as:

- Subject matter experts to assist with specific food safety related issues