
ASTA Annual Report 2014-2015

President's Report

It has been an honor to serve as President of ASTA this past year and I value the experience I have had being involved in the inner workings of this excellent association. As you will see, the various committee reports detail a great deal of activity and accomplishments. I have told my Board colleagues numerous times this past year that I continue to be impressed with what ASTA is able to accomplish with a limited budget and staff. We are a fairly small organization, but we have a wealth of experience and knowledge in numerous industry volunteers that enable ASTA to accomplish a great deal. To everyone who has committed, and continues to commit, their time and expertise this past year, I thank you for what you have done on behalf of ASTA and the spice industry.

There is no shortage of topics to discuss. However, I would like to focus on two key issues that ASTA worked on this past year that had a major impact on the spice industry and, in particular, how the industry is perceived by regulators and consumers. The first is the retail study that FDA conducted to fill a data gap, noted by ASTA, in the Draft Risk Profile on Pathogens and Filth in Spices. The second is the recent spate of recalls due to the presence of peanut protein found in ground cumin.

The retail study results were extremely positive for the spice industry and served to underscore ASTA's position that sampling of spices at import is in no way indicative of the safety of product the industry ultimately delivers to consumers. The FDA Draft Risk Profile showed more than six percent of spices sampled at import tested positive for *Salmonella*. ASTA provided lengthy comments to FDA outlining our position that most spice at import is essentially a raw agricultural commodity that will undergo significant cleaning, processing and treatment before being consumed. The retail study bore that out, showing just 0.3% of the spices FDA sampled at retail tested positive for *Salmonella*. ASTA submitted an excellent, in-depth scientific assessment to answer some of FDA's questions as well as comments in support of our position and focus as an industry on clean safe spice. We await word on whether the retail study will be published and when the final risk profile will also be published. ASTA has given the FDA ample evidence of industry's efforts to address their concerns.

Much of our attention in the past two months has been focused on the expanding evidence of peanut protein in ground cumin. The ASTA Board of Directors had extensive discussions about this issue and the appropriate role for the association. We focused on providing as much information to members as possible, both in terms of the ongoing issue and regulatory compliance. The ASTA staff rose to the occasion and issued numerous electronic bulletins with regular updates, provided extensive FAQs and an update on ASTA's meeting with FDA. We have had extensive discussions with numerous ASTA members and they have provided valuable information. ASTA has collaborated with the Grocery Manufacturers Association (GMA) and we have worked very closely with the Food Allergy Resource and Research Program (FARRP) at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. FARRP has been a valuable resource of information and support, including participation with ASTA in our meeting with FDA.

ASTA Vice-President/Secretary Greg Lightfoot represented the Board at the FDA meeting. As expected, the Agency was not willing to establish a threshold for peanut protein in spices, however, we were able to provide them with some ideas to review and the dialogue will be ongoing. Unfortunately, this is a complicated situation that cannot easily be fixed. ASTA has provided information to our members on allergen labeling regulations and the Agency's guidance in that area.

The peanut/cumin recalls and subsequent news stories, particularly in the UK, have raised the issue of economically motivated adulteration which is something the FDA is also investigating. This is an important issue for the spice industry to address as the actions of a few have tremendous impact on many. Look for additional education and resources in this area in the coming months.

I would like to thank my fellow members of the ASTA Board for their commitment to ASTA and the spice industry and for their friendship. And, to the ASTA staff for their ever-present support and professionalism; we could not exist without them. I am very proud to be a member of ASTA, what we stand for and because of the people who share an interest in this unique and special industry.

I have enjoyed every meeting, challenge met and being a part of this excellent organization.

My sincere thanks to you all for granting me such a meaningful opportunity.

Kirk Bewley
President