Australian Meat Industry Council Position on the use of Nitrates and Nitrites in Smallgoods Products

The Australian Meat Industry Council (AMIC) is the peak body representing retailers, processors, and smallgoods manufacturers across the country. We are committed to ensuring the safety and quality of our products and to meeting the expectations and preferences of our consumers.

Nitrites and Nitrates:
The industry acknowledges interest raised from time to time on the use of nitrates and nitrites in Smallgoods products, and on the potential of formation of nitrosamines.

Nitrates and nitrites contribute to the preservation of the product and prevent the formation of the powerful botulinum toxin. Botulism was traditionally associated with the consumption of sausage and the use of nitrates and nitrites to prevent botulism has been known for hundreds of years.

Nitrates and nitrites are present in many foods including meat products, and in water. Nitrates and nitrites are naturally present in many vegetables, such as spinach, lettuce, celery, and beetroot. According to Food Standards Australia New Zealand, vegetables contribute to about 45-78% of the total dietary exposure to nitrates and nitrites, and fruits contribute 11-30%.[2]

In fact, Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) *found that:*

> *"Processed meats account for less than 10% of total dietary exposure to nitrites. Australian consumers should be reassured that exposures to nitrates and nitrites in foods are not considered to represent an appreciable health and safety risk".*

Recently, a scientific assessment by the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) on the risks to public health related to the presence of nitrosamines in food[1] led to changes in the allowable levels of nitrates and nitrites permitted for use in Europe. EFSA acknowledge their very conservative approach to this assessment and make 6 recommendations, all of which identify the need for further research.

The use of nitrites and nitrates in meat products is regulated by Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) Food Standards Code[3]. The Code sets the maximum permitted levels of nitrates and nitrites in various food categories, as well as the labelling and information requirements for food products. The Code is based on scientific evidence and risk assessment, and it is enforced by the Australian states and territories.

It is not clear whether FSANZ will follow the European's lead and reassess nitrate and nitrite in foods. If they do, it will be based on a risk assessment and since Europeans consume different amounts of these products compared to Australians, it is unlikely that FSANZ will specify the same changes to the Code as in the European regulations.

Industry is dedicated to working with the relevant authorities, stakeholders, and consumers to address concerns regarding nitrosamines in food. Industry is also committed to ensuring the safety and quality of our products and to meeting the expectations and preferences of our consumers.

In Summary, AMIC would like to reiterate the following key points:

1. *"Nitrates and nitrites are natural compounds that are found in many foods, especially plant-based ones. In contrast, smallgoods such as cured meats contain much lower levels of nitrates and nitrites and do not account for an unhealthy volume within the typical Australian diet".*

2. *"Smallgoods products use nitrates and nitrites in accordance with the food safety standards and guidelines set by the authorities. The Smallgoods Industry ensures that the levels of these compounds are safe for consumers and do not exceed the maximum concentrations allowed by the Australian Food Standards Code".*

3. *"Nitrates and nitrites are vital food additives that protect consumers from food poisoning caused by harmful bacteria. Nitrates and nitrites inhibit the growth of these bacteria by reacting with the iron in the meat and creating a barrier that prevents the toxin formation. They also preserve the freshness, colour, and flavour of smallgoods products by preventing oxidation and rancidity."*

End.

References:

1. **EFSA CONTAM Panel (EFSA Panel on Contaminants in the Food Chain), 2023. Scientific Opinion on the risk assessment of N-nitrosamines in food. EFSA Journal 2023;21(3):7884, 278 pp.** https://doi.org/10.2903/j.efsa.2023.7884
2. **Food Standards Code -** https://www.foodstandards.gov.au/code/Pages/default.aspx
3. **FSANZ (2011) Survey of nitrates and nitrites in food and beverages in Australia.** Survey of nitrates and nitrites.pdf (foodstandards.gov.au)
4. **FSANZ Food Labelling** - https://www.foodstandards.gov.au/industry/labelling/Pages/default.aspx
5. **PrimeSafe** - https://www.primesafe.vic.gov.au/standards-and-guidelines/primenotes/smallgoods-meat-products/