

Submission to FSANZ in reference to P1007

Background to Australian Specialist Cheesemakers' Association (ASCA)

The Australian Specialist Cheesemakers' Association (ASCA) is a non-profit organisation recognised as the peak industry body for the Specialty Cheese (SC) sector.

The two main purposes of ASCA are to:

1. provide a forum and vibrant network for the specialty cheese industry and
2. promote awareness of and stimulate demand for Australian specialty cheeses.

ASCA was formed in 1994 driven by the need to provide a forum for specialist cheesemakers and related industry stakeholders, to network and discuss matters of mutual concern and be represented by a single voice.

Our vision is to promote and accelerate excellence in the Australian specialty cheese industry by bringing together the best available knowledge and expertise to stimulate dialogue and provide continuing education, operational guidance, recognition, professional development and economic returns for members.

ASCA consists of around 100 members, most of whom are cheese makers or industry associates such as retailers and suppliers.

Our Position on behalf of our members

In order to make a submission on behalf of our members we released a survey to our cheesemaking members (55 members from around Australia) to which 20 replied. This represents 30% overall of our cheesemaking members. The results of this questionnaire are the basis of our submission.

Of the respondents the greatest proportion represented produce cows and goats milk cheeses, or a combination of both. Most were from small (under 20tonnes per annum) producers with only 2 producing over 100tonnes per annum.

70% of respondents believe that raw milk production of specialist cheeses could increase health risks whilst 30 % believed that there would be no increase in health risks if regulations changed.

There is a belief amongst ASCA members that a change in the current regulations could lead to an increase in complexity of food production regulations, food safety audits, and costs to the producer

One third of respondents believe that a change in regulations could improve their businesses yet two thirds believe that the regulations would either be detrimental or have no effect.

Below is a sample of responses to our survey from our members:

“Sue & I are constantly asked for raw milk and un-pasteurised cheese on the Far North Coast of NSW. I would like to know more regarding the benefits of raw milk and will be researching evidence pro and against.” Debra Allard, Tweed Valley Whey Farmhouse Cheese, NSW

"Health risks are dependent upon the quality of the raw product & standards of farm testing in place. Raw milk (& cheese) is actually BETTER for our health AND save energy and time, but whether the cheesemakers and the public are ready for it is another story. There will be a lot of learning to be done." Trevor Brandon, Red Hill Cheese

"I had a quick read on FSANZ website, seems they are asking for submissions prior to any conclusions from their own safety reviews - I guess this is of concern as any submission made will be unable to refer to any perceived food safety threat. I would be prepared to form an opinion after analysing these results and the protocols used in FSANZ's risk analysis - forming an opinion without that information seems a little pointless to me." Simon Gough, Binnorie Dairy, NSW

"I am not in favour of raw milk cheesemaking as there are too many amateurs that think that is the only answer and there will be increased risk to the consumer. We will all pay if there is a food incident regarding specialty cheese." Kate Woodward, Hunter Belle Cheese, NSW

“Raw milk cheese that can be demonstrated to be safe (via accurate micro testing) should be available for sale in this country. The quality of Australian milk is sensational and this should be a selling point of our fabulous product!” Corinne Blackett, Drysdale Cheese, VIC

“When I was in the UK and Ireland last week, the raw milk cheesemakers that I met, all test every batch of product. With this level of testing, my cheese business would be unviable. Compliance costs are currently one of my major inputs. For a small producer, any increase would have a massive impact.” Bruce McGorlick, Locheilan Farmhouse Cheese, VIC

“I have a healthy respect for pasteurised milk. I do not know the conditions of all farms that milk is picked up from. The milk that we are currently receiving is from a small co-op with high standards but if you were buying through a large co-op/company, you would have no idea of the conditions on each and every farm.” Sue Aston, Snow Brand Cheese, NSW

“We would appreciate an inclusive approach to the submission similar to the UK Specialty cheesemakers approach to encouraging diversity within the UK specialty cheesemaking industry. There is a place for raw and pasteurised cheeses. Even if only one cheesemaker has the ability to produce raw milk cheese then we should be encouraging their work. The UK SCA gives recommended microbiological standards in their booklet, 'The Specialist Cheesemakers Code of Best Practice, 2007'” Holy Goat, Sutton Grange Organic Farm, VIC

“It is important that there is a balance made in relation to consumers having the choice of different styles of cheese, while being mindful that we don't end up with a major food poisoning outbreak that kills someone. Some fairly stringent regulatory requirements should be in place for those manufacturers keen to pursue raw milk options. A balanced and informed discussion needs to happen in the media to allow consumers to make this type of choice.” Chris Ganzer, Kingaroy Cheese QLD

In conclusion:

In order to change the regulations with regards to the primary production and processing requirements of raw milk products there would need to be more of a groundswell requesting change amongst our members. Our position as representatives of our members would therefore be not in favor of production of raw milk cheeses, however we do believe in having a national consistency in the regulations in production and importation of cheeses and their food safety requirements.