

# New institute to focus on food-safety standards

By Doreen Hemlock

Business Writer

Sun-Sentinel

Posted October 14 2004

To export food to the United States, overseas producers must meet tough food-safety standards. But farmers and factories often lack information to comply, and foreign governments reject some rules as rigged to protect U.S. producers and keep competition out.

The U.S. agency that handles food safety for meat and poultry launched a program Wednesday to share information and build consensus over the standards: The Food Safety Institute of the Americas, an education initiative based at Miami-Dade College.

Agriculture officials from across the Americas are meeting in Miami through Friday to flesh out an agenda for the Institute. Priorities include training programs that can help Latin American officials and researchers work with food producers to meet existing safety standards or better advocate for new ones.

"Unless we can agree on the standards, unless we have the technical knowledge to develop standards, we can produce all the food in the world, but we won't be able to trade it across borders," said Eduardo Padrón, president of Miami-Dade College at the kickoff ceremonies for the new institute.

Standards matter, officials said, because international trade in food is booming. Both public health and tens of billions of dollars in yearly business could be at stake.

U.S. consumers now rely on imports for more than 11 percent of their food, up from 8 percent in the early 1980s. At least 20 percent of fruit, juice and nuts consumed come from abroad, including many items shipped through Miami such as grapes from Chile and mangos from Brazil, U.S. government research shows.

Food trade in the Americas is forecast to grow further too, as Washington forges free-trade accords with Central America and other neighbors.

Moreover, the United States is one of the world's biggest exporters of food and wants to increase those sales abroad.

When disputes arise over food-safety standards, the World Trade Organization is taking its cue from a decades-old agency that designs those international standards, the Rome-based Codex Alimentarius Commission.

Washington seeks allies in the nearly 170-nation agency and often teams up with Latin countries. That's because Europe's "precautionary" approach to standards has kept both U.S. and Latin foods out of the European market, said Elsa Murano, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's

undersecretary for food safety and architect of the Institute.

"It behooves us to help Latin American nations with training and capacity building," so they can play a more informed role in the debates, she said.

The Institute represents a homecoming of sorts for Murano, a Cuban-born microbiologist raised in Miami who worked as a university researcher specializing in food safety before taking her political job. She graduated from Miami-Dade College and is the first Latina to hold the post.

Murano's Food Safety and Inspection Service is providing the initial funding and personnel for the Institute, a modest outlay mainly to set up a Miami office. Seminars and other programs likely will be financed with fees from participants, while universities may apply for U.S. government grants to fund research, she said.

Serving as executive director for the Institute is Linda Swacina, an attorney and veteran of the Food Safety and Inspection Service who holds a college degree in Latin American studies.

Doreen Hemlock can be reached at [dhemlock@sun-sentinel.com](mailto:dhemlock@sun-sentinel.com) or 305-810-5009.