

The International Food Data Exchange

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The increased consumption of brand name and commercially prepared foods obtained from grocery stores, restaurants, and institutions has created a demand for food composition data for these products. As a result of the NLEA legislation, more food manufacturers are providing values for the components important to public health. These data provide a unique source of information to data users. A clearinghouse for the exchange of data can provide standardized access to food composition data for various applications. This development requires a standard data exchange format with well defined terms and protocols. Since data could be food label data, calculated data, or unrounded unadjusted analytical values, developers and users must agree about the nature of data to be provided. During 1994 the International Foodservice Distributors Association (IFDA) and the USDA initiated discussions to develop a concept for a food product data clearinghouse. The concept would use the newly revised IFDA Standard Data Exchange Format for the submission and retrieval of food data. It could be defined as a virtual clearinghouse with accessible "reservoirs" of data resident in remote sites managed by food manufacturers or commercial database enterprises. The development of the clearinghouse would evolve over a period of 4-5 years and include an assessment of the quality of the data. It is proposed that the first version of the clearinghouse would contain a minimum data set of the NLEA nutrients, ash, and water with quality data checks. Eventually the clearinghouse would provide calculated data as well as analytical data verified by data quality indicators. Cooperation and dialogue between the food industry, government agents, and other private sector groups is needed to achieve this goal.