

## Twenty years of allergen management excellence: tracing the path of collaboration



Words by Dr Tom Lewis, Dr Geoffrey Annison, Robin Sherlock and Natalie Hayllar

As we approach a significant milestone for the Allergen Bureau in 2025, it is opportune to look back and reflect on the ongoing collaboration to develop best practice food allergen management.

Originating from a pivotal meeting nearly two decades ago, the Allergen Bureau has evolved into a pinnacle industry non-profit organisation, shaping best practices in food allergen management. 2025 marks 20 years since its official launch in 2005, a milestone deserving dedicated celebration. Significant strides have been made since that pivotal meeting in February 2004 which led to initiatives such as the Product Information Form (PIF), Food Industry Guide to Allergen Management and Labelling (FIGAML) and the formation of the Allergen Bureau itself.

As we approach the Bureau's 20th anniversary, it is appropriate to reflect on its inception, key initiatives and evolution. Reflecting on this journey, we recognise the profound impact of collective effort and foresight in advancing food safety

practices for the benefit of the food industry in Australia and globally and, ultimately, for the allergic consumer.

Past and present leaders in the allergen management space share their thoughts below on some of the leading tools that evolved from this meeting, the latest developments in industry resources, and plans for the future strategic direction of the Bureau.

### Inception

#### **The Allergen Bureau, Tom Lewis**

February 2004 marked a significant milestone in the evolution of allergen management in the food industry. A meeting titled 'Food Allergens: Issues and Solutions for the Food Product Manufacturer' was jointly organised through the then Food Safety Centre of Excellence, AIFST and AFGC and brought together, for the first time, about 100 food manufacturing representatives who were advocating for a joint, industry-led approach to the topic of food allergen safety.

Industry experts from the USA, including Steve Taylor and Sue Hefle from the University of Nebraska, were flown in to provide their

perspective. As an amusing anecdote, the representative from Kraft, Dan, remarked that he was so immersed in the world of allergen management that his kids suggested they'd engrave his headstone with "May contain Dan".

Gathered in a meeting hall in Sydney, our overseas guests discussed their efforts and experiences in food industry allergen management. They offered their opinion that organising the type of pre-competitive collaboration and cooperation needed to coordinate a meaningful industry-wide response would be impossible. Their view was that none of the larger food manufacturing companies would be willing to enter that space, to work alongside competitors to further food safety risk assessment aspirations, and even if they wanted to, company lawyers would put 'the kibosh' on the whole idea.

So, we responded in what seemed the obvious way – we gave it a red-hot go.

The Australian Food & Grocery Council (AFGC) was considered best placed to support the initial

phases of this work and established the Allergen Forum within the AFGC's then Scientific and Technical Committee, which was managed by the now sadly missed Dr Dave Roberts.

The way we approached this challenge was in the manner recognised today as central to successful industry clusters: we acknowledged competitive tensions; we put them to one side; we openly shared our pain points (“Oh, really? You mean it’s not just me...?”); we identified the ‘burning deck’ issues; we committed to real collaboration; and we convened a central group of food industry champions to provide the organising energy.

It’s worth a ‘shout out’ here to the individuals involved in those early days. These industry leaders had the vision to debate and create what is now seen globally as a role model in collaborative food industry allergen management.

The initial Allergen Forum (and their affiliations at the time) comprised:

- Fiona Fleming (Chair) – George Weston Foods
- Adrian Sharpe – Kerry Ingredients
- Jenni Cooper – Heinz
- Jo Jeffery – General Mills
- Julie Newlands – Unilever
- Kevin Norman – Peanut Company of Australia
- Kirsten Grinter – Goodman Fielder
- Patricia Verhoeven – Cerebos
- Philip Corbet – Simplot
- Robyn Banks – Nestle
- Tania Watson – Griffins Foods (NZ)
- Tony Downer – AFGC
- Tom Lewis – Australian Food Safety Centre of Excellence.

We note with sadness the subsequent deaths of our dear friends and colleagues, Julie Newlands and Tony Downer.

This group initiated and developed seven projects to deliver against the key priorities arising from the February meeting:

- Benchmarking
- Uniform supplier questionnaire
- Information bureau
- Testing and thresholds



👉👉 *Looking forward, the Allergen Bureau will continue to support industry and the consumer as we move towards global harmonised risk assessment and allergen labelling, with a renewed focus on education, for the industry and about the industry.* 👉👉

**Jasmine Lacis-Lee, Allergen Bureau President.**

- Allergen risk assessment protocol
- Labelling
- AFGC Allergen Guide.

That was in 2004. So, where are we now, 20 years later in 2024?

Firstly, we should celebrate the fact that this industry collaboration is still active and thriving. This is a remarkable testament to the doggedness of our initial champions and those who have stepped up throughout the intervening years. It was thought when it all started that the energy and will to collaborate would fizzle out after a few short years.

Nope.

Energy, creativity (eg. brand development on the back of a serviette) and a hard focus on coal-face issues and science-based decision making keep us at the forefront of global allergen management discussions. With this foundation, and an eye to continued development, the initial seven priorities have coalesced into a suite of world-leading initiatives and resources.

### Key initiatives

Notable examples of initiatives and resources are:

#### ***The AFGC’s Product Information Form (PIF) V6 – concept to reality*** **Geoffrey Annison**

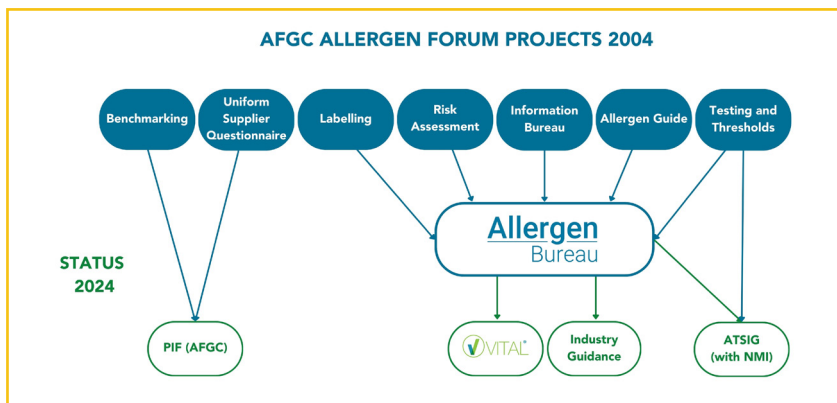
It is hard to believe the AFGC’s PIF has been supporting the food

industry for two decades, beginning with its release as PIF Version 1 (PIF v1) in 2003. Now, in its latest form, PIF Version 6, it remains a world-leading tool for facilitating standardised product information exchange throughout the supply chain.

Originally designed as a resource for R&D and regulatory affairs staff to stay informed about food regulatory changes, the PIF has evolved over successive versions in consultation with industry representatives. By 2012, the transition to PIF v5 as a complex MS-EXCEL™ spreadsheet highlighted the need for a more secure and interoperable format, leading to the development of PIF V6, launched online in July 2017.

The development of the online PIF coincided with increasing consumer demand for detailed food product information, driven by heightened awareness of food provenance, production technologies and sustainability. PIF V6 represents a significant advancement over previous versions, boasting expanded scope, enhanced functionality and improved security features.

It covers a broader range of information essential for regulatory compliance, including ingredient breakdowns, allergen declarations, pre-market clearance and nutrition details. The online portal system facilitates seamless creation, storage



and exchange of PIF V6 between businesses, offering flexibility in integration with existing IT systems or standalone operation. Interoperability is ensured through standardised data exchange protocols, supporting efficient information sharing across the supply chain.

**The Allergen Testing Special Interest Group (ATSIG). Robin Sherlock, Safe Food Production QLD, Testing and Threshold Working Group**

With bold ambition, we embarked on a grand plan to assist the industry by developing a matrix that matches samples with the correct testing kit and defines how testing should be performed using the best available science. Analysts everywhere are still diligently working on this, but we've certainly come a long way. Back when there was scarce information to draw from, our collaborative working group of laboratories and companies pooled their experience, expertise and data. What we discovered was that we had much to learn, but the best way forward was to continue collaborating.

From this initial collaboration, several remarkable initiatives have sprung forth, including NATA accreditation for laboratories, the first Australian-based proficiency program for gluten, and the establishment of the ATSIG under the auspices of the National Measurement Institute and the Allergen Bureau. This group has provided leadership and expertise when reliable analysis was critical to resolving complex industry issues.

Our commitment to knowledge sharing remains steadfast, and we've become an integral part of the Food

Allergen Management Symposium (FAMS). The ATSIG stands out for its unique approach to sharing critical information and has been recognised as a model by many global experts in the field. It continues to provide a venue to address the ongoing challenge of analytical testing, where national and international stakeholders openly discuss analytical challenges and work towards resolutions.

**Evolution**

**The Allergen Bureau's industry guidance. Natalie Hayllar, The Allergen Bureau**

Over the past 20 years the Allergen Bureau has provided guidance for the agri-food industry to manage allergens effectively, ensuring consumer safety and compliance with regulatory standards. This guidance evolved based on scientific research, industry and consumer needs, and regulatory changes. Fundamental to the success of the Allergen Bureau has been the spirit of collaboration – developed by industry for industry.

The Allergen Bureau continues to refine and promote best practice labelling for consumers with food allergy. This guidance serves as a beacon of knowledge, offering support in identifying potential allergens, determining labelling requirements and promoting a consistent approach to allergen management. The commitment to accessibility is commendable, with essential resources freely available to all food producers, regardless of their size or scale.

As Communications Manager of the Allergen Bureau for nearly five years

now, I am continually amazed by the visionaries who initiated and continue to drive the development of our invaluable industry resources. These trailblazers have led initiatives to provide crucial resources for effective allergen management and labelling practices in the food industry.

Key initiatives such as the Food Industry Guide to Allergen Management and Labelling (FIGAML) and the Allergen Risk Review Website (ARRW) give testament to the leadership shown by the many individuals who have given of their time and expertise over the years. These foundational resources, along with the VITAL® (Voluntary Incidental Trace Allergen Labelling) Program, establish the standard for allergen management across industry. The VITAL® Program is particularly noteworthy for its standardised risk assessment framework, equipping food companies globally with the necessary tools to conduct thorough allergen status reviews at every stage of production.

Additionally, the Bureau provides access to advanced tools and training through VITAL® Online, ensuring industry stakeholders always have access to the latest knowledge and resources. Looking back on my time with the Allergen Bureau, I'm grateful for the opportunity to be part of such a dynamic and forward-thinking team.

While the resources evolve and develop, what hasn't changed is the commitment to industry collaboration in a pre-competitive space, a unique approach allowing industry to work together to solve challenges.

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