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One Region, One Food Safety Language

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Malaysia has joined the Asia Pacific Food Regulatory Authority Summit (APSRAS) after its cabinet approved its membership. The country wants to strengthen its regional role in transforming food safety governance through digitalization.

It joined APFRAS with the objective of transforming food safety governance through digitalisation and positioning itself as a “Smart Gatekeeper” for the region. Malaysian authorities have said the country intends to contribute to the digital transformation of food safety governance, regulate the use of biodegradable packaging materials and harmonise the legislative framework for new food innovations. The move is also expected to support Malaysia’s national food safety and food security policies.

The urgency is evident from Malaysia’s growing dependence on food imports. Food imports increased from RM42.6 billion in 2013 to RM78.9 billion in 2023, an increase of about 85 per cent over the decade. As supply chains become more international, ensuring food safety increasingly requires cooperation beyond national borders.

As joining APFRAS is a critical step for Malaysia, it is an equally important development for APFRAS since this could be one step forward for harmonizing food regulations at the Asia-Pacific (APAC) level. Established in 2023 as a ministerial-level consultative platform, APFRAS is seeking to strengthen food regulatory cooperation and promote science-based approaches to food safety across the Asia-Pacific. Its fourth summit, held in Jeju Island, South Korea in May 2026, brought together food regulatory authorities from 14 countries surrounding the Pacific Ocean, including 8 Asian countries, two from Oceania and two each from South and North America and also three international organisations.

The summit’s broader significance lies in its ambition to move beyond information sharing towards institutional cooperation and regulatory harmonisation. Korea’s Minister of Food and Drug Safety, Oh Yu-Kyoung’s statement is significant. She has emphasised that food safety cannot be achieved by a single country or sector and requires the integration of intelligence,

innovation and collective responsibility. APFRAS is therefore potentially evolving into an important regional platform for shaping food regulatory cooperation and contributing to global harmonisation.

At the global level, the Codex Alimentarius provides a foundation through international food standards, guidelines and codes of practice adopted by the Codex Alimentarius Commission. Regional harmonisation, however, can complement global standards by addressing the specific regulatory and commercial realities of neighbouring economies.

This is particularly important in the Asia-Pacific, one of the world's most dynamic food-processing and food-trading regions. From India and Southeast Asia to China, Japan, Australia and New Zealand, manufacturers increasingly serve interconnected markets. Yet differences in rules governing ingredients, additives, contaminants, labelling, testing, certification and product approvals can turn a single product into multiple compliance exercises. For the food industry, regulatory fragmentation is no longer merely an administrative inconvenience; it is a competitiveness issue.

Regional harmonisation can reduce compliance costs, facilitate trade, improve regulatory predictability and strengthen responses to food emergencies. The prospects for convergence may also be greater at the regional level than globally because countries can share similarities in food products, ingredients, manufacturing processes and consumption patterns.

However, harmonisation should not mean imposing an identical regulatory system on every country. Food cultures, consumption patterns, risk profiles and institutional capacities differ across the region. A more practical objective is regulatory convergence: agreement on common scientific principles, definitions, reference standards, testing methodologies and conformity-assessment mechanisms, while allowing countries to retain legitimate national measures.

ASEAN's long-standing efforts to harmonise food standards provide an important foundation, although progress has been slower than hoped. The experience demonstrates that political commitment alone is insufficient; sustained implementation, institutional coordination and industry participation are essential.

Three priorities should now receive attention. First, regulators should align with Codex standards wherever scientifically appropriate and establish transparent procedures for national differences. Second, APAC economies should pursue mutual recognition of accredited laboratories, inspections and certifications so that businesses do not repeatedly demonstrate the same compliance. Third, regulators should develop interoperable digital systems for certificates, traceability and regulatory information.

These measures could particularly benefit small and medium-sized food businesses, which often face a disproportionate burden from regulatory duplication. Greater convergence could lower market-entry costs, encourage exports and allow more regional companies to participate in cross-border trade.

The benefits would extend beyond industry. Common scientific methodologies, faster information sharing and coordinated responses to food-safety incidents would help regulators identify and manage risks across increasingly complex supply chains. Consumers would benefit from a more consistent and responsive food-safety system.

The Asia-Pacific food economy is already deeply interconnected. APFRAS offers an opportunity to ensure that its regulatory architecture catches up with that reality.