

BEST PRACTICES FOR THE USE OF FOODSHIELD DURING FOOD AND FEED INCIDENTS



***Partnership for
Food Protection's
Surveillance,
Response, and
Post Response
Workgroup***



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Contents

Contributors	2
Introduction to Using FoodSHIELD to Share Information During Incidents	3
Purpose Statement.....	3
Scope.....	3
Background	3
User Benefits of FoodSHIELD for Incident Response Efforts	4
Workgroup Best Practices	5
Initiation of a Workgroup	5
Importing Workgroup Members	5
Incident Workgroup Title	5
Folder and Document Titles	5
Document Management	6
Meetings and Webinars	8
Sharing between Workgroups	8
Deactivation	9
FDA Information Sharing	9
Requesting Membership to FoodSHIELD	10
Just-In-Time Training	10
Help Desk	10
Give Feedback	10
Resources	11



Contributors

Thank you to the following contributors from the PFP Surveillance, Response and Post Response Workgroup for their collaboration on this effort.

Project Chair: Katie Blackshear, FDA

Workgroup Members: Justin Asberry, FDA; Jonathan Burgos, FDA; Kristen Conway, CT; Tobi Erskine, FDA; Herminio Francisco, FDA; Steven Galvez, FDA; Lisa Joseph, FDA; Kelly Kline, PA; Angela Kohls, FDA; Kailey Lewis, FDA; Brian Sauders, NY; Quynh Tran, FDA; Randy Treadwell, AFDO; Marlon Turner, FDA; Nicole Yuen, FDA



Introduction to Using FoodSHIELD to Share Information During Incidents

Purpose Statement

Provide best practices for using the FoodSHIELD web-based system to food and feed regulatory stakeholders and promote integration of food and feed incident response to enhance mutual coordination, communication, and collaboration. This document is meant to provide best practices for using FoodSHIELD as a tool to improve real-time communication among stakeholders during food and feed incidents.

Scope

The FoodSHIELD Best Practices outlines FoodSHIELD functionalities and stakeholder roles during a food and feed incident such as foodborne disease outbreaks or recalls. The document shares expectations and benefits for organizations utilizing FoodSHIELD, as well as suggested best practices. This document is intended for those who have basic knowledge of FoodSHIELD and focuses on utilizing the platform for incident response.

Background

FoodSHIELD is a secure, web-based system for communication, collaboration, coordination, education, and training for food safety and public health professionals. Food and feed stakeholders including FDA, state, and local agencies use FoodSHIELD during incident response efforts to share information, increase collaboration and communication, and provide training and education.

FoodSHIELD has 34,866 total users and 2,430 active workgroups, consisting of public health and food regulatory officials from federal, state, and local government agencies as well as appropriate academic, industry, and association partners. Information sharing via FoodSHIELD has become an integral part of outbreak investigations.

In addition to state and local government workgroups, FDA also uses FoodSHIELD for some investigations. When FDA CORE is leading an outbreak, a CORE representative may set up a workgroup to manage relevant investigation-related documents. FDA has laws they must follow to share information with state and local officials. Specific information sharing may be best conducted through the Information Disclosure Portal (IDP), which is housed on the same platform as FoodSHIELD and uses the same high-level of security.

This Best Practices document was initially created in 2015 based on the results of an online exercise completed by representatives in MN, TX, IA, and various FDA offices. Each stakeholder received a specified task list and timetable to work from during the exercise. The task list contained several communication and collaboration functionalities to be tested. This document was revised in 2024 based on local, state, and federal partners' experiences using FoodSHIELD during outbreak response.

When using this Best Practices document, it is helpful for participants to have prior knowledge of FoodSHIELD and to have taken the FoodSHIELD training (see [FoodSHIELD Help](#)). Additional information on FoodSHIELD, including electronic versions of outreach materials, can be found on www.afdo.org/foodshield.



User Benefits of FoodSHIELD for Incident Response Efforts

FoodSHIELD allows access for all users, is free to join, and easy to use. It allows for real-time communication, information sharing, coordination, and collaboration between users from all levels of government. FoodSHIELD meets the federal government National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST)/ Federal Information Security Management Act (FISMA) Standards so it provides a secure environment that agencies can use to collaborate and communicate with each other.



Workgroup Best Practices

Initiation of a Workgroup

Each workgroup will be created as public or private, which will impact its ability to be found in the FoodSHIELD directory. The workgroup owner will have the ability to select public or private when setting up the workgroup. The workgroup owner also has a choice on how new members are added to the workgroup: either they can add themselves or they must request membership.

The owner will invite each participant to be either an administrator or member of the workgroup. If the owner of the workgroup leaves the agency or assumes another role and needs to reassign ownership of the workgroup they can do so via the FoodSHIELD helpdesk.

There should be at least two administrators in their workgroup to allow for continued administrative management if one of the administrators is away from the office. This best practice becomes important for continuity of operations if one administrator leaves the agency or assumes another position as well.

Importing Workgroup Members

There is an option to import members in a FoodSHIELD workgroup via a spreadsheet. The spreadsheet needs the following column headers: fname, lname, and email. The spreadsheet can be imported from the “current members” tab and there is an option to have each new member notified of their workgroup membership via email. Workgroup member lists can be downloaded from the admin page in FoodSHIELD as well.

Incident Workgroup Title

As a best practice, include at minimum your agency, the pathogen, and year in your workgroup title so other members can search for your workgroup in FoodSHIELD. Workgroup titles may be altered due to other ongoing incidents.

For example:

- Agency creating the workgroup/pathogen (outbreak cluster code or identifier)/vehicle (with status, if known)/month and year of investigation initiation
 - Example: MDA/Salmonella Newport 166/Lettuce (suspect)/May 2022
 - Example: CORE/E. coli O121/Lettuce/November 2024

Folder and Document Titles

Folders should be created within the incident workgroup and should generally include the categories below. The folders should be named with the agency creating the folder in the title (e.g., CORE/xxx). Other folders and subfolders may be necessary.

- Example folder categories:
 - Epidemiology (e.g., line lists)
 - Traceback Records (e.g., invoices, bills of lading, shopper card records)
 - Laboratory



- Investigation/Inspection Documents (e.g., inspection reports, root cause investigation/analysis or investigation summaries)
- Public Media Response/Public Information
- Recall Documents (recall notice, recall audit checks)
- Incident Summary Documents

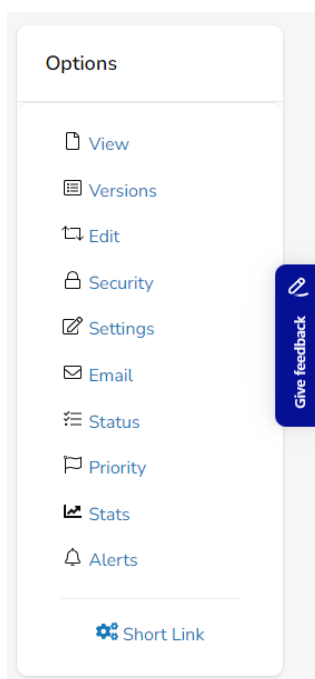
Be clear and descriptive when naming the type of document being uploaded. Include information such as the agency from which the document was received (the commonly used acronym or state abbreviation), description of the document (e.g., “line list” or “invoice/point of service”), and date (either date created or date uploaded). For example, don’t include a line list and label it as “epi info.” It could be more appropriately labeled as: “MN Line List 04122024.”

Document Management

Administrators should designate a Point of Contact (POC) to upload documents to streamline the process and avoid duplication of work.

Word and Excel Documents uploaded to a FoodSHIELD workgroup can be edited in real time by members of the workgroup if the workgroup admins have allowed that document to be edited. This can be done by opening the document, clicking “edit” on the right-hand menu, and turning on “track changes” from the menu at the top of the document. Clicking the green “save document” button at the bottom of the editing window will save the edits.

Under Options, a document can be emailed to the workgroup without downloading to your desktop.



Consider the need to add version control within documents consistent with your agency protocols. FoodSHIELD has version controls capabilities.

- To change the version of a document, go into “settings” to the right of the document, click in the “Current File Version” field and update the version number. Clicking “save” at the bottom of the page will update the file list so it shows the updated version number.
- Some users and documents may also have a “Replace” feature for easier version control under “Options.”
- Example of version control: “MN Distributor X Traceback 041424 V4”

Consider the need to add disclaimers within documents you upload to FoodSHIELD. Disclaimers can be necessary and useful to notify users of important information, while working to limit your agency’s legal liability. Follow your agency’s protocols and consult with agency legal staff for more information if necessary.



- Example of disclaimer: “This document may contain non-public information, including information for which public disclosure is prohibited by law, such as confidential commercial information, pre-decisional/deliberative information, and/or personal privacy information. The information in this report may not be further disclosed without permission by the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture.”

Communications with Workgroup Members

There are multiple ways to communicate with workgroup members in FoodSHIELD. Some of the most helpful modules for investigations include:

- SecureSend
 - Can be used to send very large files to workgroup members’ emails, has expiration date feature to limit retention and various security features like read-only, password protection, limited number of views, and auto-removal dates.
- Communications
 - Send Email – Can be used to send correspondence to workgroup members’ emails
 - Text Alerts – Can send mass text alerts to members
 - Distribution Lists – Can be helpful feature to send information easily to specific subgroups within your workgroup
- Discussions
 - Discussion board within the workgroup allows all members to post questions and have other members respond. Includes the ability to attach documents.
- SecureForm
 - Allows workgroup members to create surveys for both workgroup members and external partners. Includes an auto-generated web address for recipients who may not be FoodSHIELD members.
- Teams
 - Allows the workgroup admins to divide up the larger workgroup into specific sub-groups to make communications and coordination easier (e.g. traceback team, recall coordination team, planning section, etc.).
- Alert
 - Can be used for mass communications, including to non-workgroup members. Format can be SMS text, email, and/or Text-to-Audio. Includes a spreadsheet template for mass upload of contact info.



Alerts

[Home](#) [Create Event](#) [Send Alerts](#) [Track Alerts](#)

Send Alert Step 4 : Compose Alert Message

Users

- ▶ Emails
- ▶ Cell Phones
- ▶ Land Lines

Alert Information

Instructions:

Please select which type of alerts you will be sending out. For each type selected the corresponding information will need to be filled out.

Alert Type(s): ☐ Email ☐ SMS ☐ Text to Audio

Meetings and Webinars

ZoomGov meeting capabilities are available in FoodSHIELD.

- Meeting capacity in FoodSHIELD is 500 separate connections across the entire system at one time. This can be increased to 1,000 concurrent attendees when using the FoodSHIELD virtual Conferences and Events tool.
- Recording the meeting is optional. The link to the recording can be accessed directly on FoodSHIELD and shared with participants after the meeting. Recordings automatically include transcription services.
- Breakout sessions and polling are also available within the FoodSHIELD meeting platform.

Sharing between Workgroups

Folders can be shared between workgroups so admins are not required to upload the same document in multiple folders/workgroups. Before folders are shared, they should be named appropriately so the agency name (the agency that created the folder) is at the beginning, right before the folder name.

- Ensure that folders are shared only with parties deemed appropriate by your agency. Some agencies may choose to not share folders based on agency protocols.



- If you want to share a folder, send an email to the party you want to share with through your agency email system, and ensure the party agrees to the folder being shared.
- Ensure the document permissions settings within the folder are appropriate before sharing the folder.
- When you set this folder as available (shared with) another group, it means anyone involved with the groups you select can upload documents to this folder and have access this folder's documents. The folder will be shown as a PURPLE folder in the 'home/originating' group. In the 'shared with' group, the folder will be GREEN.
- When a folder is shared, the folder automatically updates so the same documents are available to all partners.

As a best practice, have only one workgroup per response. If a single state outbreak turns into a multistate outbreak, the FDA workgroup takes precedence. To avoid duplicative efforts, FDA does not upload documents into, or share folders with, state-owned workgroups created to manage information for the same response.

Deactivation

If you are an owner or administrator of a workgroup, you should consider criteria for deactivating the workgroup. There are several mechanisms to further secure/archive information within a workgroup once your agency deems it appropriate to do so. The workgroup recommends these two options as best practices:

- Owners may close a workgroup so only the owner retains access to it by navigating to the “admin” section and selecting the “close group” feature. This option inactivates the workgroup but keeps materials and details in archive in case of future need. If the workgroup is closed, other changes may not be made.
- Owners may also keep the workgroup open but choose to restrict permissions of the workgroup members to restrict which users may edit or upload new documents while allowing other users to continue to view the documents if needed.

In rare instances you may choose to completely remove the workgroup by emailing the FoodSHIELD administrators at helpdesk@foodshield.org (please note all data will be removed and may not be recoverable if using this option).

FDA Information Sharing

- FDA has policies and procedures that must be followed for any non-public information sharing. For more information see FDA's website: <https://www.fda.gov/federal-state-local-tribal-and-territorial-officials/communications-outreach/information-sharing>
- During incidents where documents with non-public information are being shared with partner agencies, the FDA may determine it is best to use a workgroup in the Information Disclosure Portal (IDP) instead of FoodSHIELD. Please reference the IDP's website to access Frequently Asked Questions and fact sheets for more information about the IDP: <https://www.informationdisclosure.org/>



- For any information sharing questions please contact FDA's information sharing team at FDAInfoShare@fda.hhs.gov

Requesting Membership to FoodSHIELD

Food, feed, and public health partners wishing to request a new FoodSHIELD membership can access the join page here: https://www.foodshield.org/?page_id=71. Potential members will be required to enter the required information, including contact information for a reference who can confirm the potential member's current food, feed, or appropriate public health roll that warrants a FoodSHIELD account.

The join page also includes information on how prospective FoodSHIELD members are vetted to ensure the platform's continued security.

Just-In-Time Training

Videos and guidance documents have been created to demonstrate how to navigate and complete common tasks in FoodSHIELD. These can be accessed by clicking on the yellow circles with question marks located throughout the platform. A separate help window will appear with pointers and FAQs.

Short just-in-time videos can also be accessed in the "What's New" section of the FoodSHIELD website here: <https://app.foodshield.org/my/ee/updates.cfm>.

Help Desk

The help desk is available in FoodSHIELD by navigating to the black icon at the bottom right of each page. This feature is helpful for common technical issues when navigating the platform. This option brings the user to a real-time, live chat function.

Alternatively, the user may email the helpdesk at helpdesk@foodshield.org or call (1-888-912-2209, available 8:00 AM-4:00 PM Central Time).

A FoodSHIELD Tools Guide is available on AFDO's website here: [FoodSHIELD – Association of Food and Drug Officials \(afdo.org/FoodSHIELD\)](https://afdo.org/FoodSHIELD).

Give Feedback

A tab on the left side of the screen allows users to provide a screenshot of the issue and tracks how the user accessed the page. This assists the technical support team in troubleshooting the issue. A video on how to use this feature can be found on the help desk chat feature.



Resources

1. Council to Improve Foodborne Outbreak Response (CIFOR) Food Safety Clearinghouse: [Cifor \(en-US\)](#)
2. The RRT Best Practices Manual: Key Components of Effective Rapid Response for Food and Feed Emergencies: [2017-RRT-Best-Practices-Manual-REDUCED.pdf \(fda.gov\)](#)
3. FEMA Emergency Management Institute: [Emergency Management Institute - National Incident Management System \(NIMS\) \(fema.gov\)](#)
4. FDA Contacts for Regulatory Partners: [FDA Contacts for Regulatory Partners | FDA](#)
5. Partnership for Food Protection's Surveillance Response and Post Response workgroup's Best Practices for Improving State and FDA Communication During Food Recalls
https://pfp1.wpenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Best-Practices_FDA-and-State-Workgroup-Recall_-092421_Final-v2.pdf
6. Human Food Program Complaints
 - Industry and Consumer Assistance: [Industry and Consumer Assistance from HFP | FDA](#)
 - Safety Reporting Portal: [Safety Reporting Portal \(hhs.gov\)](#)