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## Improving the Food Science Information Service: an ITA-FRDC collaborative venture

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Better technical and scientific capabilities in the agri-food sector are, beyond any doubt, needed in Latin American countries. In the majority of scientific organizations there is a lack of strategic information on agri-food and in spite of existing documentation structures, information on this area is rarely available to researchers and professionals. For SMEs, survival depends on the company ability to be competitive in its own market (national), as well as in the Mercosur market and those belonging to other Latin American countries (Andean Community). At present, companies have limited access to new information technologies that could keep them abreast of innovations and help them to remain competitive while improving and developing new products.

In this context, the libraries of the Food Technology Institute (ITA) of INTA, Argentina and the Food Research and Development Centre (FRDC), Canada, have initiated a project on information resources in the agri-food field. The ITA and the FRDC have much in common: they are world-class research centres in the food processing sector and both interact with their industries. They are also interested in increasing and diversifying their research partnerships and collaborative efforts.

### Food Research and Development Centre

The main objective of the FRDC is to assist the Canadian food industry to increase its competitiveness through research in the area of food processing. A leader in its field, the FRDC promotes technology development and transfer. It also supports private Canadian and foreign companies by providing the technology and the scientific and technical environment to implement research and development projects.

The FRDC is an integral part of Agriculture and Agri-food Canada network composed of 18 research centres and it has expertise in the agrifood field. Its facilities are located in the St. Hyacinthe Agropole, that is, the agri-food industry and science park, near Montreal, one of Canada larger food markets.

Its research teams specialize in biotechnology, meat and dairy industries and food conservation technology areas. Over the years, the FRDC staff has acquired extensive international experience by working closely with companies, international organizations and several research centres throughout the world and has collaborated with numerous countries on all five continents in diverse areas such as food science and technology, associations and interest groups building, documentary research, networking and partnerships, strategic and logistics planning and project management.

Over the years, the FRDC library has become the largest documentation centre in Canada in food processing. Its catalogue can be found on the Internet and the library has developed various information services for industry and its in-house clientele. By means of the information retrieval and analysis service, specialists in food science and technology can obtain documentation and answers to their research inquiries. These services are based on industry needs and offered at an affordable price. It should be remarked that the FRDC library participated for many years in international projects, which have led to train fellows from several countries on technology watch, the creation in Haiti of an agri-food information retrieval and dissemination centre and carried out many courses about the strategical importance of information in Morocco, Haiti and Vietnam. The FRDC library also has a

collaborative agreement with Ialine+, an international agri-food documentation centre at Adria-Normandie to report and disseminate scientific information.

Briefly, the FRDC international activities are aimed to:

1. perform research and development projects in collaboration with foreign research institutes, universities and associations and
2. give support to developing countries.

It is worth of mention that the Centre fosters strategic alliances and partnerships in the food sector designed to advance scientific and technical knowledge while also promoting:

- innovation and the transfer of Canadian technologies and “know how”;
- the expansion of Canadian activities abroad;
- strengthen business relations between Canadian and foreign partners;
- food quality and innocuousness as well as environmentally safe practices.

With the perspective of the 2005 hemispheric free trade area in mind, Latin American countries initiatives that point out to expand and strengthen their agri-food business relationships with Canada could result of benefit for them.

## **Food Technology Institute (ITA)**

The ITA has R&D capabilities in technology innovation (processes, raw materials and services) in the agri-food sector. The main assets of INTA in this area are the ITA, located at Castelar, Buenos Aires, and eight different laboratories dedicated to handle food products in seven different provinces of the country. It is worthy of note that INTA can cover all the links of the food chain from the primary food production to the food processing final stage, which provide it with a complete overview for evaluation purposes.

Furthermore, the ITA has developed ties with agri-food industries and other sector organizations in Argentina. These collaborative projects have made it possible to combine ITA technical and scientific skills with its partners commercial and industrial capabilities.

The INTA also intends to strengthen its technical assistance role with companies of the agri-food sector in order to facilitate the transfer of technology from the ITA. To that purpose INTA has developed an active partnership policy with universities, research centres and organizations in more than 27 countries.

## **ITA-FRDC Project**

Having into account the aforementioned scenary, the ITA and the FRDC have undertaken a collaborative venture in the field of new information and communication technologies, under the auspices of Inter-American Institute for Cooperation in Agriculture (IICA). An initial FRDC backed activity let the head of the library and information analysis services to visit the documentation centres of INTA, Castelar, especially that at ITA. The goal of the visit was to facilitate dialogue between researchers and professionals of the information area of ITA and FRDC, as well as to develop a plan to improve the information service.

The ITA library should be able to fulfill the scientific information needs of its research community. Unfortunately, researchers do not have access to a qualified information infrastructure, which hinders their productivity. So, its collection does not reflect the explosion of knowledge available at the present in the food sector. Though the library suscribes to the main food science periodicals, the researchers do not have usually access to the main specialized databases and to Internet. Collaboration is good with the other INTA libraries, especially with those specialized in Genetics, Entomology and Veterinary fields,

being an automated union catalogue accessible to personnel. The documentation centre of ITA has an adequate reading room and also has available space to hold new acquisitions. The staff is highly qualified and motivated; however, they do not have flexible mechanisms to satisfy their needs. As a result of two years of deep cutbacks, the libraries do not have enough funds for purchasing books and periodicals. At present, the existent computer system does not give access to network databases. On the other hand, with the exception of the ITA that is still not online, we observed that the Internet is used extensively to compensate for the lack of resources.

A second activity carried out under the frame of the venture consisted in a four-week internship for an INTA documentation professional to acquire new expertise and skill, as well as get familiar with North American and European information sources and make connections with Canadian government libraries.

During the stay, the professional learnt about the FRDC and Agriculture and Agri-food Canada, with special emphasis on the Canadian Agriculture Library and its research library network. Besides, the internship focused on the topology of agri-food information and on developing familiarity with specialized periodicals and their suppliers. Besides, the fellow was trained in the use of food processing databanks as well as to access standards, methods and patents. The selective dissemination of information was also a matter of study during this period.

Likewise, the fellow attended an introductory session on the information retrieval and analysis service available to Canadian industry. Unique in Canada, this service provides industry with rapid access to a collection and specialized personnel to assist them in locating needed information.

In order to get better acquainted with the Canadian documentation infrastructure, the professional visited the main Quebec and Ontario agri-food information services such as the Canadian Agriculture Library and its network, as well as the Canada Institute for Scientific and Technical Information (CISTI).

## Perspectives

The FRDC and the INTA could take benefits from networking their respective networks and by having the opportunity to exchange information, thus improving their own client services. Prime contacts and a better understanding of both research centres by the professionals of the information involved in the project, will help to forge strategic alliances. However, to be successful, this collaborative efforts should be considered under a frame of permanent contact for a long term period. Finally, it must be mentioned that this collaboration will also help the FRDC library better meet its clients needs through access to prime information on food products from South America.

In order to accomplish the goals above mentioned, it is being analysed to perform in the project a second group of activities to enhance the ITA core collection via new information technologies. These activities will focus on improving and upgrading the ITA food science information service to provide researchers and professionals a quick access to a collection, allowing to the agri-food documentation centre to better meet the needs of its in-house clientele. The FRDC Information Retrieval and Analysis Service is in position to complement ITA service. Moreover, the critical problem of document supply will also be improved through the use of new information transmission technologies.

This second phase of the project would also help Argentina to acquire a modern information infrastructure specialized in food processing, thus enabling the country to provide a qualified information service for both researchers and industrialists. Likewise, it will promote new information technology dissemination and meet both Canadian and Argentine users needs. Over the long term, the benefits afforded by this infrastructure could be extended to other agri-food research centres of South America.