

Update on INFOODS, 1992

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Abstract

Since the last nutrient databank conference, INFOODS has continued, as predicted then, to focus on work outside the US. INFOODS staff have participated in planning of database, electronic mail, and computer system installations in the South Pacific and in Southeast Asia, and a two-site project in Central and South America is expected to begin within the next calendar quarter. We have also participated in efforts to lay the groundwork for serious critical scientific evaluation of systems for classification and description of foods that are to be used between countries. The INFOODS-supported electronic mailing/discussion list, announced at the last year's conference, is in use as a source of information and exchange of ideas. The next year is expected to see the completion of the basic technical work needed to establish regional data centers with full data interchange capabilities and the establishment of at least three such centers.

This Report

This is, intentionally, a brief and informal report covering the status of various activities rather than a comprehensive review of INFOODS and its activities.

A Continuing Concentration on International Activities

Most INFOODS efforts over the past year have been outside the US, since there continues to be little effective interest within this country. We expect that this will, sooner or later, become a problem: We continue to receive many inquiries about data availability from within the US. As the international and regional infrastructures become stronger, those inquiries become more difficult to satisfy since our resources shift to follow and support the other infrastructure. We continue to investigate ways to designate and support a data and resource center within the US, but with no actual success so far.

Outside of the English- and French-speaking areas of North America, things are much better. Several regional groups are functioning at a fairly high level with locally-generated support and, as intended, only close liaison relationships with INFOODS. New projects are being initiated to develop complete regional data centers for LATINFOODS (tentatively in Guatemala and Chile) and for the ASEANFOODS portion of SASIAFOODS (in Thailand).

INFOODS has also resumed work in international standardization activities in conjunction with IUNS, as has assumed responsibility for the IUNS representation to CODATA and the various terminology and data interchange task forces that operate through that representation. The efforts in conjunction with FAO and ISO to standardize terminology for food components identified in food composition studies are expected to progress significantly during the next several months.

Publications Status

The two publications, *Compiling Data for Food Composition Data Bases* and the *INFOODS Data Interchange Handbook*, are now complete and available. The first of these is the result of the work of the so-called "missing values" committee and focuses on the issues involved in gathering, and estimating where necessary, the data for food composition tables and data bases with the goal of making future data bases more consistent, more compatible, and more useful to wider audiences. It also contains considerable information that may be of value to users of existing data bases, for example, in understanding the considerations and decisions that go into constructing those data bases. The *Interchange Handbook* provides the information about the INFOODS data interchange and representation system, supplying the structure and identification information for food description systems, description and identification of data values, and for food data records and responsible organizations that complements the nutrient identification material in the earlier *Identification of Food Components for INFOODS Data Interchange*. Together, these specifications provide a comprehensive model for storing and transferring food composition data (at the end-user and archival levels and everything in between) with precise identification of data elements and no loss of whatever information may be available.

These publications can be ordered directly from the United Nations University Press, 5-53-70 Jingumae, Shibuya-ku, Tokyo 150, Japan. Fax +81 3 3499 2828.

In addition, the long-awaited *Guidelines* manual by Heather Greenfield and David Southgate, initiated by INFOODS and carried forward under EUROFOODS auspices, is being published by Elsevier and should be available within the next several weeks. A new issue of the *INFOODS Newsletter* is in preparation to announce these publications, to report on general progress, and to provide the foundation for a new edition of the *International Directory of Food Composition Tables*. The latter should appear late this calendar year or early in the next one.

Important Recent and Pending International Activities with INFOODS Participation or Strong Liaison

An OCEANIAFOODS Plenary and Workshop was held in December 1991. It included, in addition to country reports and coordination activities, a number of special reports and a demonstration and review of the computer environment prepared

in New Zealand and proposed, with modifications, for use as the core of regional data centers for the South Pacific and the ASEAN countries. With INFOODS and UNU sponsorship, computer systems have been delivered to New Zealand for the South Pacific Commission (with probable eventual delivery to New Caledonia) and to Thailand.

A training workshop was held in Bangkok later in December to set up the system in Thailand and to work with representatives from Thailand, Malaysia, and the Philippines on the design and coordination of local and regional computerized food composition data systems. One of the most immediate outgrowths of that effort is a working electronic mail link connecting the Institute of Nutrition in Thailand (the SASIAFOODS coordinating center) with the rest of the world, including electronic mailing lists maintained by the INFOODS Secretariat.

Planning and development work continues to get AFRICAFOODS on a firm footing possibly by splitting it into smaller and more homogeneous units. EUROFOODS is meeting the same week as the Nutrient Databank Conference. Two of the highlights of the agenda are the progress reports on the efforts to perform serious parallel scientific evaluations of the utility and appropriateness of Eurocode-2 and Languag for various food description and coding activities. The first step in this process, completed last winter and spring, might be described as figuring out what these systems really were: identifying and pinning down specific and stable versions for evaluation, agreeing on purposes and goals to the point that appropriate evaluation criteria could be selected, and separating the behavior and content of the systems themselves from various planned and existing software for using them in different environments.

As announced last year, the WHO Collaborating Center for Nutrition is sponsoring a meeting on Validation Issues: Quality control and measurement error in Berlin from October 12th through 14th. Contact the center, c/o Institute for Social Medicine and Epidemiology, Bundesgesundheitsamt, Postfach 330013, 1000 Berlin 33, Germany. Fax: +49 30 7800 7109, for further information.

International Working Conference on Nutrient Data and Data Base Management

INFOODS has started planning an international working conference on nutrient data bases and data base management for May or June 1993. This meeting will focus on issues of nutritional data management, software system designs and criteria, statistical issues in the description of nutrient data, impact of computer system design decisions on the ultimate scientific results, and models for organizing data and systems. The last of these includes coding and classification issues as they relate to the actual computer-based data management and data retrieval systems.

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The intent is to try to get a broad overview of what is going on in the field and determine how increased exchange of ideas and possible standardization can help to improve things, but with a clear focus on the computer science and data management issues, rather than on the broad spectrum of tutorials and introductions together with user, data, and progress report issues that have characterized, e.g., these Nutrient Databank Conferences. Papers that make scientific contributions or that provide critical reviews of different approaches to selected problems are solicited and will be referred to the extent needed to insure scientific quality. We expect to coordinate this working conference with the more data-oriented workshop that Heather Greenfield is organizing as a satellite for the IUNS Congress and intend to report on it at the Congress. Contact the INFOODS Secretariat for further information.

Electronic Mailing Lists

As we announced at last year's conference, INFOODS is increasingly working by electronic mail. As part of this, we are working to facilitate electronic mail connections in the nutrient data community where they are necessary, especially for regions and important supplier groups (e.g., the installation in Thailand discussed above).

An electronic mailing list has been set up for general discussion and exchange of questions, answers, and ideas about nutrient composition data. To subscribe to that list, send electronic mail to food-comp-request@infoods.mit.edu. Additional lists, at least one devoted to INFOODS-specific topics, are expected within the next year.

INFOODS will also follow up, and continue to be involved in, electronic publication efforts such as the recently-concluded Swedish "Food Informatics" effort. As part of the Secretariat relocation discussed below, the address of the INFOODS computer host is likely to change at some point in the coming year from INFOODS.MIT.EDU to INFOODS.UNU.EDU. There will be a long overlap and transition period.

Secretariat Relocation

In July 1992, the INFOODS Secretariat is being relocated into new space shared with the International Nutrition Foundation for Developing Countries and the UNU Food, Nutrition, and Development Programme. The relocation should improve internal communications and our ability to respond to inquiries from regional organizations and, to some degree, from individual users. The new address information is:

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