



SAGB Position Statement following spurious bacteria readings July 2015

During the week commencing 13th July 2015, regular samples of bivalve shellfish were tested at the Public Health Laboratory Service, Porton Down, Wiltshire, for the purposes of routine Shellfish Harvesting Water monitoring and the subsequent Classification of these waters. The results of these tests *suggested* that the shellfish in question had been contaminated by bacteria to an unprecedented level.

The samples were taken from a number of different sites from both inshore and offshore environments and represented different coastlines, catchments and different shellfish species.

An obvious common factor connecting the samples was that they were all tested in the SAME laboratory.

The numerical results for the E. coli numbers reportedly found within the shellfish were so far out of character as to be **instantly questionable**. They included one that was beyond its normal range by a multiple of 1 million.

These results, quite simply, cannot be accurate or believable.

Closures of relevant businesses by the Food Standards Agency (FSA) ensued around the coasts of Somerset, North Devon, Cornwall, South Devon, Dorset and the States of Jersey, whilst an investigation was put in place by Public Health England and the National Reference Laboratory, Cefas.

Industry, via SAGB, requested that FSA re-open the areas immediately, whilst offering to enhance their end product testing in order to demonstrate their due diligence. This request was declined.

The market for bivalve shellfish is very sensitive to public perception of the water quality in which they are grown. Public announcements of the closures attracted intense media attention, which had an immediate and widespread effect on the market. Sluggish sales and mistrust of shellfish is ongoing, despite the reopening of some of the production areas in question, and fragile coastal communities have been caused unnecessary distress.

The handling of information related to the events and the inability of the authorities to admit that these erroneous results were due to an error in the testing regime has understandably angered industry members.

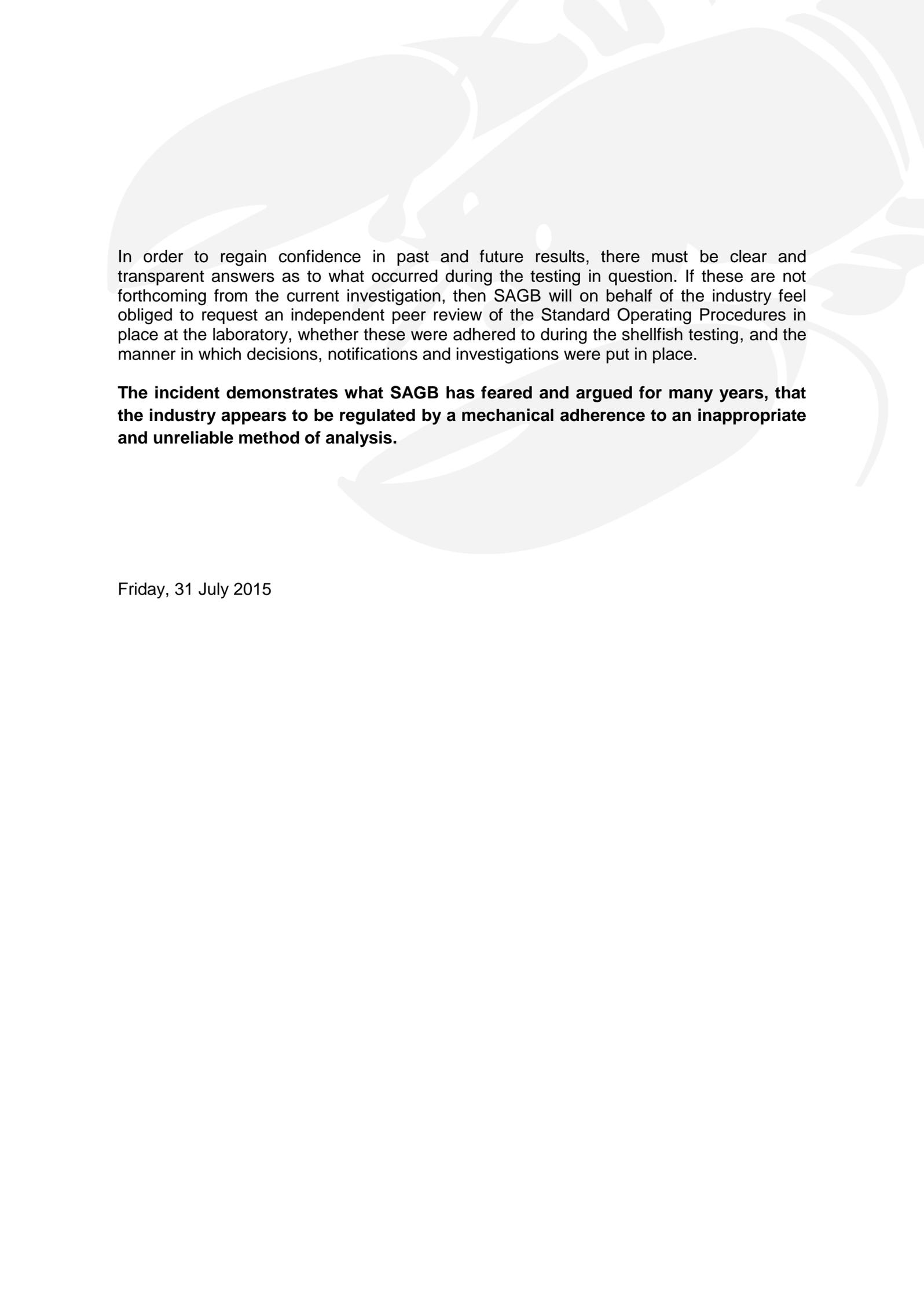
The whole episode comprising what we see as technical errors combined with poor information management by the authorities, calls into question the competence of the current system. A rapid review system identifying and investigating anomalous results urgently needs to be put in place, before the knee-jerk response of unnecessary closures occurs.

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In order to regain confidence in past and future results, there must be clear and transparent answers as to what occurred during the testing in question. If these are not forthcoming from the current investigation, then SAGB will on behalf of the industry feel obliged to request an independent peer review of the Standard Operating Procedures in place at the laboratory, whether these were adhered to during the shellfish testing, and the manner in which decisions, notifications and investigations were put in place.

The incident demonstrates what SAGB has feared and argued for many years, that the industry appears to be regulated by a mechanical adherence to an inappropriate and unreliable method of analysis.

Friday, 31 July 2015