

During the last decade, Food Safety has been a top priority for the Commission. Results of this work are evident today. There is now a growing level of consumer confidence in Europe and it is much higher than what it was a decade ago.

It has taken hard work and solid commitment to rebuild this trust, which suffered a heavy blow from the BSE and dioxin crises of the 1990s.

We were able to restore trust thanks to:

- The comprehensive body of legislation built up at EU level
- The diligent work carried out by the Food and Veterinary Office and Member State authorities, and
- The reliable food safety tools in place, such as the Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed

Consumer expectations nowadays extend beyond the product on the shelf. EU citizens want to know that high standards are applied throughout the food chain. For instance, they want to be sure that animals in food production are healthy and well treated.



They also demand safe vegetables and fruit, and they want them to be produced in an environmentally friendly way. They expect proper hygiene practices to have been applied throughout the production chain and any substances, which are added to food, to be safe.

They want to be fully and properly informed of what they are buying and eating.

The EU food safety policy, with its comprehensive "farm to fork" approach, responds to all of these demands.

It is true that a fair amount of our activities in the Commission have traditionally been agriculture-oriented.

Equally true is that our existing Food Safety and Animal Health standards are the direct result of a need to have a properly functioning Internal Market. Member States had to be confident that the opening of markets would not lead to a lowering of standards applied at national level.

The Commission also had to reassure Member States that standards would be harmonised and enforced in a uniform way throughout the Community.

The result is a body of legislation that is based on solid science with consumer interests being at its very core.

Over the years, the Commission has made considerable efforts to ensure that the expectations of European citizens are met.

The Commission is also very well aware that European producers face tough competition from third countries, some of which offer cheaper animal products than those produced in the European Union.

Some of these countries have lower labour and feed costs. But they can also have lower food safety and animal health and welfare standards.

Animal welfare helps us achieve key social goals such as food safety and quality, ensuring environmental protection and sustainability.

The Commission is fully committed to a competitive European food industry. It is our single largest manufacturing sector and our biggest employer.

I do not accept claims that our legislation imposes unacceptable costs.

It is demanding – I agree. But the costs of getting it wrong on issues of food safety and animal health are far too high. Who needs reminding of the costs of BSE? Or of the foot-and-mouth disease outbreak in the UK in 2001?

Our legislation and its associated costs are in reality a good investment for both consumers and producers – in rural areas or elsewhere in the EU. We have a series of real-life examples that prove this assertion.

Any serious and widespread disease outbreak can deliver a severe financial blow to farmers and the rural areas of our Union. An EU-wide reaction has proven to be the best guarantee for success and to restore the competitive edge damaged by such outbreaks.

And I assure you that measures do not create a competitive disadvantage for European farmers. Quite the contrary! The story of BSE is a good example in this respect. The constant fall in the number of BSE cases proves how efficient the strict containment and eradication measures have been since their implementation in 2001.

Let us also not forget the successful way in which we have come to deal with the various avian flu outbreaks every year. Through co-operation at EU level we manage to prevent the spread of an animal disease and its possible mutation and transmission to humans.

The strategy to control Salmonella in food is another good example. Targets to reduce the prevalence of the disease have been gradually introduced in poultry flocks. Trade restrictions apply when flocks are infected. Control and prevention of Salmonella on farms are therefore essential in order to limit economic consequences.

Our Salmonella control programmes also represent an excellent example of how the entire feed and food chain is regulated to ensure that the end-product is safe. Reducing the incidence of Salmonella at farm level is the key to lowering its incidence through the rest of the food chain, and, ultimately, to protecting EU consumers.

Therefore, our Salmonella reduction measures start from the feed given to the chickens, and apply right through to the egg on the table.

Another example highlighting the effectiveness of our measures concerns the hygiene standards applicable to primary production. Although these could be perceived as additional burden, their implementation undoubtedly benefits the overall sanitary situation of farms and, consequently, their production output.

The Commission has also been active in the field of plant protection products. We will finish the review of old pesticides in the first quarter of 2009. This has been a huge work programme resulting in higher protection of consumers, farmers and the environment by eliminating old pesticides which cannot be used safely.

We have also tabled a proposal to replace the 1991 Directive on the way we authorise pesticides. This proposal contains strict and clear safety criteria for increased public health standards both for the users, our farmers and consumers.

It also contains measures that would increase the availability of safer plant protection products.

Strict approval criteria for pesticides, the setting of Maximum Residue Levels, the implementation of our rules on animal welfare at the farm or during transport... in fact our entire strict approach to ensure our food is safe... All these factors have allowed our producers to also improve the quality of our food and thus make it more attractive to consumers.

In other words, consumers not only feel confident they eat safe products, they also like what they eat. They enjoy their food more. And this can only be beneficial for the farmers, food industry and consumers alike.

Due to the significant reliance of the EU's rural areas on agriculture this is also vitally important in the survival, well-being and development of rural Europe.

I am fully aware of concerns about having to comply with high European standards, which might differ from standards in third countries. I have already made a brief reference to this in relation to our animal welfare standards.

It is important that all food on the Community market is safe, irrespective of origin.

The Community imposes strict requirements in relation to imports. And we do not hesitate to take strong action when our requirements are not respected.

We should however remember that the Community itself is a major exporter of food and needs a rules-based system such as the one of the World Trade Organisation. We are obliged to respect the principles of non-discrimination and proportionality.

I would like to sum up by underlining that all of our food safety decisions have been, and will continue to be, based on sound science. This is fundamental to retain the confidence of our consumers.

However, this does not deny a role for other valid considerations.

We have to get the balance right. Science has to be open and transparent but we must also take account of other considerations such as food security, the environment, the competitive position of our farmers and food industry.

Today, we can reassure consumers that the standard of Food Safety in Europe is among the highest in the world and that quick preventive action will be taken if any threats arise.

Of course, consumer confidence is much more easily lost than gained.

For that reason, we cannot tone down our efforts. We must remain vigilant and constantly alert to changing situations and potential threats. And that is exactly what we are planning to do.

It is the best ensure a bright future for all involved and concerned with Food Safety.