

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to appear before this conference here today.

I warmly support the initiative to focus on the pursuit of excellence in the farming and food sectors – and in particular on developing the potential to **add value**.

Plus it is a particular pleasure for me to appear alongside my colleague Commissioner Mariann Fischer Boel.

Our responsibilities within the Commission are to a large extent complementary – and indeed dovetail together as regards the farming and food sectors.

In addition to food safety issues, the relentless rise of obesity in the EU brings an increasing need to look at food and public health policies in an **integrated way**.

Today – I would like to identify specific areas related to quality, in which further progress can be made to match better the needs and desires of European consumers.

### **Food safety – an essential precursor of quality**

The first and crucial point is that safety must be a precursor to quality in almost any field. And this is particularly relevant to food.

Unless our food production is both safe and considered to be safe by consumers, all considerations of quality have to take a back seat. Safety must underpin quality.

I need hardly remind this conference of the dark days – not so many years ago – when a succession of food related crises severely damaged the entire food production sector – BSE and Dioxin being two prominent examples.

In short, the public lost confidence in our collective ability to provide a safe supply of food to European consumers.

Nobody will thank you for the safety of your food. Indeed the public demands nothing less than absolute safety – and rightly so.

However, the minute something goes wrong – or is perceived to have gone wrong – the food industry and those in positions of responsibility are immediately propelled into the public spotlight.

## **Risk**

Of course, food production and supply can never be free of risk. We can and should minimise risks as far as possible, but zero risk is not an attainable goal.

**So, how do you maximise safety, minimise risks and ensure quality of the food product?**

**Ensuring good hygiene and manufacturing practices** as well as the **application of HACCP** (*Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point* ) **principles**, as foreseen in our Food Safety legislation, are essential ingredients of a quality food product.

## **Traceability**

Another key element concerns **traceability**, with a requirement for food operators to identify at least one step forward and one step back in the production chain.

## **Flexibility and Diversity and Innovation**

**Diversity** of the food culture is further aspect of quality. I should stress that our food safety system in no way seeks to homogenise food production methods in the European Union. Far from it. Europe is rightly proud of the rich and diverse nature of its food culture. In fact, this diversity also "adds value" to the farm produce.

We recognise both the **cultural significance** and also the **economic value** of the production of **traditional foods**, practices which are spread right across the Union.

That is why our hygiene regulations, for example, provide the flexibility for Member States to apply for derogations from the usual rules, to enable traditional practices to be followed, provided that the overall food safety standards can be achieved.

Equally, **innovation** in the food sector can constitute an added value and therefore should not be hampered. With this in mind, the new food hygiene package, of fixing rigid detailed rules, instead focuses on the food safety objectives to be achieved.

### **Diversity (imports)**

I should just say a few words about **imports of food and food products** into the European Union.

On this point, I should mention the **immense value that imports add to the richness and diversity** of European food culture – with exotic foods and products satisfying the varied and sophisticated tastes of European consumers.

And, of course, our commitments to free trade and WTO obligations mean our markets are open to foreign imports.

Some take the view that the Commission takes a softer line as regards imports than we do towards home produced food. *[Current problems with imports of Brazilian beef is a case in point.]*

But whilst obviously we cannot achieve the same level of hands-on control that we can within the European Union, our approval, monitoring and inspection systems as applied to third countries aim to ensure that EU standards are met.

In essence, we take the same approach towards imports as we do to products within the Union. When deemed appropriate and unavoidable, decisions are taken to halt the import of specific products from specific countries.

Less restrictive measures are taken when these are deemed sufficient to maintain the required level of protection while problems are resolved.

## **Perceptions of quality**

Finally, **how do you communicate quality?**

### **Nutritional quality (labelling)**

Food labelling – or more specifically nutrition labelling can be a way of communicating food product's quality. The central aim is to make it easier for consumers to identify the nutritional qualities of foods to facilitate their choices to match their dietary wishes.

This is a difficult area – and one where the Commission has been considering, for a number of years, how the current legislation might be changed.

At present, nutrition labelling only becomes compulsory when a nutrition claim is made in the labelling, presentation or advertising of a foodstuff.

But many stakeholders believe that nutrition labelling should become mandatory, in view of rising obesity.

Such views need to be considered alongside research, which indicates, that whilst most consumers are keen to have nutrition labels, the majority of consumers do not actually make use of them.

The situation has become more complex in recent years with the development, by Governments and industry, of front of pack (**'signposting'**) schemes.

My view is that such schemes should be in conformity with existing labelling legislation, and should not contradict or undermine efforts to improve current EU rules.

Responses to a recent consultation (on "*Labelling: competitiveness, consumer information and better regulation for the EU*") will be used towards developing proposals for revising the general food and nutrition labelling legislation.

## **Animal welfare**

Finally, I want raise an issue of great concern to European citizens – that of the welfare conditions of animals kept for food production.

Animal welfare standards are often seen by consumers as an indicator of other product attributes – such as food safety, quality and healthiness.

Indeed many **consumers equate good animal welfare standards with good food standards in general, and higher food quality.**

Moreover, in addition to wanting to see more welfare friendly products on the shelves, citizens have expressed a readiness and willingness to pay for such products.

These points arose from a **Eurobarometer** survey published in June 2005, and were confirmed by provisional results of a second survey carried out last autumn, to be published next month.

However, a majority of citizens stated that relevant and appropriate information to identify products produced under acceptable animal welfare conditions is often missing or inadequate. They would prefer a means of identifying such products – through labelling and logos.

The same surveys also reveal that consumer knowledge on the way animals are farmed is often insufficient to make a truly informed choice.

These results give encouragement to the implementation of the ***Community Action Plan on Animal Welfare***, which foresees the establishment of standardised indicators for animal welfare and possibly an EU animal welfare label.

In parallel, we want to set up a proper communication strategy to strengthen consumer knowledge and thus bolster informed choice.

The introduction of standardised animal welfare indicators to classify a hierarchy of welfare standards to be applied – from minimum to higher standards – could serve as starting point to explore options for labelling in a systematic manner.

Of course, whilst addressing animal welfare from the citizen's point of view, we need to ensure the concerns of the agriculture industry are also properly considered and addressed.

Some parties voice the concern that high European welfare standards add to the pressure on EU producers from cheap imports.

I firmly believe that promoting our high standards can help counter the pressure faced by EU producers from competition from third countries.

Europe is clearly leading the world in the promotion of animal welfare.

EU producers need to capitalise on the marketing advantages that spring from this.

Our high welfare standards need to be considered and promoted as an asset and an opportunity, rather than viewed as an economic burden.

**Quality Assurance Schemes** which include high animal welfare requirements already offer a way to gain a price premium for those products.

They offer, in particular, opportunities for small farms to benefit from regional marketing and their proximity to their customers.

## **Conclusion**

Ladies and Gentlemen, may I conclude by re-stating my commitment towards a dynamic and thriving European food sector, underpinned by safety, motivated by the pursuit of excellence, and fully in tune with modern consumer demands.

Thank you.

**End**  
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