

Speaking points Jan Mulder

Conference "Food Quality Certification - Adding Value to Farm Produce"

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European agriculture's biggest asset: Quality of production

1. More than in any other trading bloc in the world the European Union is concerned about production methods that go beyond mere human health concerns. The EU has extensive legislation about environmental concerns that are expressed for instance in the birds and habitat directive and the Water Framework Directive. Moreover, it has legislation on animal welfare that is in general not matched anywhere else in the world.
2. European agriculture has responded to these concerns of the public. After the adoption of an initiative report on this subject in the European Parliament in 1998, on the request of the E.P. a study was conducted. The number of food quality schemes in the EU appeared to be already several hundreds at that time.
3. It is likely that at present there are many more. European agriculture's biggest asset is its quality of production, so it is a good thing that farmers are distinguishing their products positively in the market. However, for consumers the abundance of different quality labels is sometimes a little bit confusing.
4. All signs at present, with the WTO negotiations in mind, point to increased access for agricultural products from all over the world to the European market. Due to this liberalised market, European farmers have to compete increasingly with the rest of the world.
5. This might give rise to unequal competition conditions. Production conditions that are imposed on European farmers are not imposed on farmers outside the EU. The best would be if this aspect could be taken into consideration within the WTO negotiations. However, the rest of the world is not very receptive to this idea. And also the European Commission, who is negotiating international trade liberalisation agreements on behalf of the Member States, does not seem to address much priority to recognition of the Non-Trade Concerns under the WTO. The second best solution to my opinion would therefore be twofold:

6. Firstly, labelling of European origin should be strengthened, so that consumers can see at first sight whether products originate from the European Union or not. In combination therewith consumers should be made much more aware of the high standards, that the European agriculture is subject to. The European agricultural model should be explained to the wider society.
7. Secondly, a European quality label should be developed, which will be attributed to food quality schemes which can prove that their production standards lie even considerably above our legal European standards. A quality label for quality labels. An online register should give insight to consumers on the meaning of the subsequent quality labels. Objective, comparative information should allow consumers to make an informed choice.
8. Acquiring such a kind of European recognition should be completely voluntary of course. And every non European food quality scheme should be able to carry the sign as well. As long as they meet the same requirements of course.
9. The register can also help to facilitate the mutual recognition of quality labels, in order to avoid segmentation in the market for farmers. Other ways to facilitate the benchmarking process should be explored as well.
10. The European Union is reputed to have too many rules and regulations. Therefore the industry should as much as possible control itself. However an independent institution should have the final control, by controlling the controlling bodies. The European Food and Veterinary Office (EFVO) in Ireland might be an excellent candidate for that verification function.