

# **Speech of the German Federal Minister for Food, Agriculture and Consumer Protection Horst Seehofer**

**Event:** European Commission Conference “Food  
Quality Certification – Adding Value to Farm  
Produce“

**Theme:** Food Quality Assurance Schemes –  
perspectives of the German Council Presidency

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Check against delivery!

Dear Commissioner Fischer Boel,  
dear Commissioner Kyprianou,  
dear Mr Mulder,  
Ladies and Gentlemen!

For the old German statesman Otto von Bismarck a „light lunch“ consisted of caviar, smoked eel, meatballs in gravy ("Königsberger Klopse"), homemade sausage, herring in broth, anchovies, potato salad and Pomeranian goose fat. This is what is said of him. In addition, as a young official, he always brought some sandwiches when attending buffet receptions – just in case.

This goes to show two things: on the one hand, Bismarck was not a weak eater. On the other hand the food must have been of excellent quality. How else could he have digested it so well and lived to an age of more than 80 years?

The quality of our food is thus related to well-being. However, not only questions of food quality, but also of its safety and traceability will be discussed here today.

Let me add a few thoughts to everything the esteemed previous speakers have already pointed out so correctly and pertinently.

„The price will be forgotten, the quality remains“, is a saying in France, I believe. This means: quality is what remains. This is what will be remembered – it isn't just an economic matter. Such quality and its assurance is a cultural achievement to which agriculture and food production contributes on a daily basis. Quality and quality assurance are part of the food culture. Food not only sustains body and soul. Food also creates community.

Food culture has therefore always been a sign of human sophistication as a whole. Today, food culture is not only for the upper classes, it has been democratised: high quality food products have become affordable for the broad masses. Precisely for this reason, quality assurance has become so important. It is therefore not surprising if food

quality and its assurance at the European level play a significant role in our Council Presidency. What do I mean by this?

Firstly: We need a strong food industry, based in the rural areas. Strengthening this industry must be our common goal. The numerous small and medium-sized food businesses are the engines of growth in rural areas. Competitiveness of these businesses is determined by the quality of their products.

Secondly: The framework conditions for agriculture and food production have to be adapted to the challenges of the globalised world. Competitiveness through quality assurance, this is a key area that Europe has to claim for itself.

Thirdly: During the German Council Presidency, I will support the further development of the high level of food safety in all parts of the European Union. Europe already has a top position in the world. It is our aim to guarantee the highest degree of safety for consumers also in the future.

In this context, animal welfare is not being forgotten. Germany is taking the EU action plan on animal welfare very seriously. For food of animal origin, this means an intensive occupation with the improvement of protection through labelling.

We are determined to work towards these goals together with our Portuguese and Slovenian friends.

Europe's strength lies in its high product quality and its broad diversity of regional specialities. Nonetheless, as we have observed time and again over the last couple of years, there are always some black sheep. I would therefore like to stress explicitly:

All actors involved in the production, processing and marketing of food products have a common responsibility vis-à-vis the consumers.

We should aim to achieve a high and solid level of consumer trust in the production of high quality food products.

Because: „*Quality means that the customer will return, not the product.*“ This phrase was coined by Hermann Tietz, founder of the well-known Hertie chain of department stores. Evidently, he was successful. Quality assurance across all levels of the production chain is an indispensable precondition for success.

Actors in agriculture and food production would be well advised to respect the changed quality awareness of our consumers. The internal control of food businesses is the basis for the production of high-quality food products. External controls by public authorities can only verify this.

There are many types of assurance schemes. Their number is constantly increasing. The market segment is innovative and progressive. This goes to show one thing: agriculture and food production are on the right track.

A functional assurance scheme guarantees impeccable quality. Continuously high quality secures consumer trust and with it the position of a food business in the market.

Naturally, the European and national legislator cannot leave the whole area of food production exclusively to market forces. Rather, politicians have to create a legal framework which sets norms and creates reliable conditions for industry.

The new food and feed law of the European Union has created important signals. First and foremost, it requires that food has to be safe.

Further, the law demands that food businesses can trace back their products. This traceability is an obligation. However, this goal can be reached in different ways. The advantage lies in the variety of solutions and openness for innovative technologies.

I am thinking in particular of the new radio technology (RFID), which enables traceability across the supply chain. However, data protection concerns still have to be taken into account. In addition, there are good examples for functioning quality assurance schemes that enable a complete quality control throughout the whole production chain, from the field to the table

Ladies and Gentlemen,

safety of food products is the basis for a healthy and wholesome diet. This creates consumer trust.

Quality assurance starts as early as with animal feed. Since 1 January 2006, feed producers have to comply with the corresponding requirements under the new feed hygiene regulation.

Here I would welcome the development of Europe-wide guidelines for economic actors, to enable the (as far as possible) harmonised implementation of legal obligations.

Furthermore, the new EU food hygiene law has been in place for more than a year. Under this law, food businesses are obliged to assure, by means of internal control, compliance with hygiene requirements and therefore the safety of the food they produce.

At the same time, public authorities are examining the internal controls. This combination ensures an effective consumer protection. We are aiming at improving this system of internal controls.

Improving the functioning of quality assurance and public control to enable an undisturbed production - this should be the guiding principle for the future.

One thing, ladies and gentlemen, is not acceptable: if we are guaranteeing the quality and safety of food produced within the European Union – at higher cost – but don't require the same from imports.

For me, food safety is not divisible. Independent of its origin or method of production, all food has to fulfil the legal requirements related to hygiene and safety – local products as well as imported products.

Beyond that, businesses can become involved in special quality standards. Many businesses are using the chance to distinguish themselves through the use of voluntary quality assurance and certification schemes which guarantee special quality criteria.

I am thinking in particular of the Bio-Siegel, which guarantees consumers compliance with the EU Regulation for organic agriculture. I therefore welcome explicitly the latest revision of this regulation, which strengthens the control system

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Despite the existence of legal rules, I still see a lot of unused potential in quality assurance for the European agriculture and food industry.

During the German Presidency of the EU Council I would like to set further impulses. In this context, let me point out the relationship with animal welfare. We are currently discussing the question: "Can an animal welfare label improve the welfare of farm animals?" What criteria would such an "animal welfare label" have to fulfil?

On this topic, a conference will be organised in the near future, together with the Economic and Social Committee.

Whatever will come out of this – I am particularly interested in achieving this in a simple way, without too much bureaucracy. We don't want to create new barriers. Cutting red tape remains a central concern of the German Council Presidency.

Let me add a final thought: We should see the globalisation of markets as a chance, also as regards quality standards.

The Doha round has received some important inputs lately. I am confident that the negotiations will be successfully concluded.

For standardisation we not only need agreement in the general rules of the GATT, but also concerning the agreements on technical barriers of trade and on sanitary and phytosanitary measures (TBT and SPS-agreements).

Quality standards of food have been taken up also by the WTO.

Finally, aspects of intellectual property are relevant. The TRIPS-agreement stands for the special protection of geographical indications for wines and spirits. The European Union would like to further develop this instrument in the future negotiations. In my view, protected geographical indications offer a lot of potential to positively differentiate products in the market.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In the further development of food quality assurance schemes one has to do justice to the dynamics and complexity of the production chain on the one hand. On the other hand, neutral certification and objective information for consumers have to be ensured.

*„Trust will come, once everybody has his safety“.* This was already known by our national poet Friedrich von Schiller. Good quality and efficient assurance schemes can achieve the trust of the consumer.

This will be a critical precondition for a competitive agriculture and food production in the European Union – now, and even more so in the future. And this, we shouldn't forget, is a guarantee for a high European food culture.