



Food and drink:

Commission proposes actions to get the most out of marketing standards and quality schemes

Action is needed to improve communication about the qualities of agricultural products – to help reconnect farmers with consumers. Quality labelling schemes must also be easier for people to use and understand and EU policy must be more coherent. These are the main recommendations of a European Commission Communication on agricultural product quality policy, adopted today. EU farmers meet some of the most stringent farming requirements in the world, including environmental protection, animal welfare and the use of pesticides and veterinary drugs. In addition, they use their expertise and skill to give their products individual qualities that add value. But do farmers get a fair return for their efforts? Do consumers get accurate information about product characteristics and farming attributes?

"The EU's agri-food sector has a well-deserved reputation for high quality thanks to decades, even centuries, of commitment to excellence," said Mariann Fischer Boel, Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development. "Our farmers have to build on this reputation to sustain their competitiveness. They need to communicate better with consumers about the qualities of their products. The EU is willing to help in this effort. We have a golden opportunity to bring more coherence and simplicity to our various labelling and certification schemes."



In the Communication the Commission proposes in particular to:

- Extend labelling that identifies the place where agricultural product was farmed;
- Examine the feasibility of laying down specific optional reserved terms for 'product of mountain farming' and 'traditional product'. The latter could replace the current 'traditional specialities guaranteed' scheme.
- Create a unique register for all geographical indications (for wines, spirits and agricultural products and foodstuffs) while preserving the specificities of each system.
- Improve the single market for products under labelling schemes, particularly for organic products.
- Improve international protection of geographical indications and contribute to the development of international standards for marketing standards and organic product.
- Develop 'good practice' guidelines for private certification schemes to reduce potential for consumer confusion and to reduce red-tape for farmers.



The Communication was drawn up based on the 560 contributions received in response to the Commission's **Green Paper** on agricultural product quality from October 2008 and input from the High level conference organised by the Czech Presidency in March 2009.

Agricultural **marketing and quality standards** are the key to fair trade and avoiding consumer deception about product qualities. They ensure basic product identifies (what can be called 'butter?'); classifications of product (what is minimum fat content of "semi-skimmed milk?"); and definitions of value-adding 'reserved' terms (what qualifies as 'cold pressed' olive oil?); and lays down requirements for origin or place of farming labelling.

The **Geographical indications schemes** encourage high quality agricultural production, protect valuable product names from misuse and imitation, and help consumers by giving them information concerning the specific character of the products. Some 3000 names in wines, spirits and agricultural products and foodstuffs have been registered.

TSG (traditional speciality guaranteed) highlights traditional character, either in the composition or means of production. Only 20 names have been registered under the current scheme.

Organic farming: The Commission wants an end to impediments to trade in the single market from divergent national standards. The new organic logo under development (see IP/09/640), which will apply obligatorily to EU product from 1 July 2010, should help this process.

Certification schemes: Private and national certification schemes provide assurance that certain aspects of the product or its production method, as laid down in a specification, have been observed. Despite some problems (e.g. of threats to single market, potential consumer confusion and duplicative schemes), stakeholders are taking steps to address them — hence the Commission sees no need for legislation at this time. It plans instead to develop good practice guidelines in consultation with stakeholders.