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Member of the European Commission, responsible for Health

Commissioner Borg addresses a public hearing on "Official controls along the food chain"

Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

Tonio Borg, European Commissioner for Health, attends a meeting of the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety Committee at the European Parliament

Brussels, Belgium, 14 October 2013

Public Hearing on
"Official controls along the food chain"
organised by the Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety (ENVI)

MONDAY 14 OCTOBER 2013
EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT - BRUSSELS

SPEECH

Chairman,

Honourable Members of the Environment, Public Health
and Food Safety Committee,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I very much welcome this opportunity to address such a
broad audience on the subject of the Commission's
recently adopted proposal on official controls in the agri-
food chain.

Official Controls Proposal

The official controls proposal is part of a comprehensive package which includes major initiatives to modernise the animal health, plant health and plant reproductive materials legislation, together with a proposal which aims to simplify the management of Commission expenditure in these sectors.

Official controls are essential for maintaining effective and timely enforcement of EU standards by the Member State competent authorities.

Our EU rules on official controls ensure that these are carried out by the Member States across all sectors of the agri-food chain in a sound, fair and independent manner, and that the **enforcement work of the Member States** is complemented by appropriate audits by Commission experts on national control systems, which trigger remedial action when necessary.

Since the launch of the official controls proposal on 6 May, I trust we have all become familiar with its content and all recognise the important discussion points which have arisen.

Let me focus first on the two issues of financing and delegated acts.

Financing

As regards the financing of official controls, let me stress one simple truth: the sustainability of the EU control system and of the national control services charged with delivering it is at stake here.

We cannot afford, - businesses and consumers cannot afford - cuts in the capability of Member States to undertake effective controls which would expose us to the **risk of serious food safety incidents.**

Warning signs have already appeared that the economic crisis is leading to a reduction in the level of controls in certain, if not most, Member States.

I do not need to spell out why this creates a risk to the safety of consumers and to the credibility of the EU system as a whole.

Turning to fees, by expanding the use of control fees, which are at present applied only in certain areas, to most of the sectors of the agri-food chain, the draft rules recognise that all along the chain official controls represent a value-added service.

I know that some worry that this move will generate increased costs with no incentive for inspection services to provide official controls which are efficiently planned and delivered.

Let me reassure those who harbour such doubts: this change is not proposed in isolation and should not therefore be viewed in isolation!

The draft rules also introduce stronger requirements for transparency and accountability of control authorities to both citizens and businesses.

Increased transparency will also be applied to the financing of official controls. Businesses and citizens will have access to detailed information:

- on how controls are financed;
- on how fees are calculated and spent; and
- on arrangements to avoid the inefficient use of the resources collected through fees.

In short, broadening the collection of mandatory fees to key activities of the agri-food chain will **ensure the sustainability** of the official controls system as a whole by severing its dependency on local budgetary decisions, while increasing the accountability of control authorities as regards how they deliver on their control obligations.

Micro-enterprises, however, across all areas of the agri-food chain will be exempted from the requirement to pay fees, in line with the wider Commission policy to minimise regulatory burdens and to adapt EU regulation to the needs of micro-enterprises.

Delegated Acts

A second element of the proposal is the use of delegated acts for the adoption of sector-specific rules on official controls.

This will allow the legislative framework to become more flexible, as the common rules of general application will be complemented by sector specific secondary rules.

These could be amended through a simpler procedure should the enforcement needs in a specific sector so demand. Examples of such circumstances might be if the **risk profiles of certain activities** evolve, or if **new risks emerge** for which specific control requirements are not in place.

I will now turn briefly to some of the other benefits that the proposed new Regulation would introduce.

Border controls

The new rules on official controls reinforce the principle according to which controls must be risk-based – both within the EU and at our borders. This will allow a more efficient allocation of control resources that will reduce burdens on operators and authorities alike.

Importers of animals and products which are subject to controls when entering the EU will benefit:

- from the simpler, fully risk-based mechanism for border checks;
- simpler procedures;
- a single format for documents; and
- electronic documentation.

The new system will ensure that the control arrangements at our borders are always adjusted to the level of risk associated with the commodities arriving from third countries.

Anti-fraud measures

Consumers and honest businesses should feel reassured that part of the control effort deployed by the competent authorities will have to be devoted to specific controls directed at identifying intentional violations of EU rules and deceptive practices – in other words, fraud.

The recent horsemeat scandal showed that more attention needs to be paid to the possible signs of fraudulent practices, so as to identify and eliminate any such dishonest activity as swiftly as possible.

The new rules will also require that financial penalties are set at levels which at least match the gain expected by the perpetrators of intentional violations of the rules – **the punishment should fit the crime!**

And improved tools for cross border co-operation between competent authorities will help ensure that food frauds and non-compliances which affect more than one Member State are actively and effectively addressed.

International

Finally, the new rules on official controls will also serve to further strengthen the high standing of the EU Regulatory model worldwide.

The added value conferred on EU animals, plants and products resulting from an improved system and more efficient official controls will be of benefit to exporters and to consumers alike.

Conclusion

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me conclude by highlighting that another important task is now in front of you: taking the proposal through the legislative process! This will inevitably take some time, but I am sure that these efforts will pay handsome dividends in the future.

I also take this opportunity to thank the rapporteurs and the shadow rapporteurs in ComENVI and ComAGRI, and to remind them that my services are at their complete disposal.

I hope you share my confidence that the proposed changes will deliver a modern, more effective legal framework, with better flexibility and proportionality overall – meeting the needs of citizens and businesses across the European Union.

Thank you.