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Member of the European Commission, responsible for Health and Consumer Policy

Commissioner Dalli delivers speech at a conference on 'Combating food-related crime'

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

John DALLI, European Commissioner for Health and Consumer Policy, attends the Better training for safer food conference on food-related crime

Brussels, Belgium, 28 February 2012

COMMISSIONER DALLI

BETTER TRAINING FOR SAFER FOOD CONFERENCE ON FOOD-RELATED CRIME

28 FEBRUARY 2012, BRUSSELS

SPEECH

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure for me to be here today to provide the closing address for this Better Training for Safer Food Conference on food-related crime.

I am delighted to have the chance to address such an expert audience on what I consider to be one of the most important challenges – not only for the health and safety of citizens and the protection of consumers, but in a wider context for all of us concerned with law enforcement.

I sincerely hope that the last two days have been productive and rewarding for you all, and that this conference has contributed to forming new relationships and strengthening existing ones, which will prove invaluable in successfully tackling this problem in years to come.

This conference was set up to raise awareness of the broad range of issues at stake and to encourage new ideas on how to make our actions and tools in the fight against crime more effective.

I trust we have been successful on both counts, and that we can leave this conference more confident in our ability to work together to reinforce the impact of our efforts, and with "food for thought" on possible ways to improve our overall effectiveness.

Of course, we have not, as if by magic, stumbled upon the perfect tool to eliminate food-related crime.

We have however gathered a more comprehensive overview of its many facets. And we now better understand that each one of us is not alone, but instead inter-connected, and that many people across Europe are making strenuous efforts to limit the damage caused by criminal activity in the area of food.

The problem of food-related crime and the threat which it poses to food safety and quality, public health, the environment and the economy is something of which the Commission is acutely aware.

Practices such as counterfeiting and the use of prohibited or low-quality ingredients in food undermine the stated mission of our Directorate-General for Health and Consumers – to make Europe's citizens safer, healthier and more confident.

In this context, I am greatly encouraged by the work which has been done and the discussions which have taken place here at this conference – and also by the way in which it has built on the outcomes of the first European seminar on food crime, held in France in October 2010 as part of the Commission's Specific Programme: "Prevention of and Fight against Crime".

Also encouraging are the recent successes of the Europol and Interpol-coordinated operation "Opson" which led to the successful seizure of large quantities of counterfeit food and drink and the shutting down of websites dealing in such products.

This is a clear demonstration of what can be achieved through well-coordinated European-level cooperation.

The foodstuffs seized within the framework of "Opson" included:

- over 13,000 bottles of substandard olive oil;
- 30 tonnes of fake tomato sauce;
- around 77,000 kg of counterfeit cheese;
- some 12,000 bottles of substandard wine;
- five tonnes of substandard fish and seafood; and
- nearly 30,000 counterfeit candy bars;

This gives us a broad idea of what we are up against. We are not talking about petty, occasional occurrences here. Food related crime can mobilise huge resources and is driven by the lure of vast potential profits.

It is no surprise then that organised crime has recently begun to focus on these very lucrative activities. It is incumbent on all national enforcement systems to provide an efficient and robust response to this.

As we are all aware, the task of those fighting food-related crime is far from easy. Food-related crime is clearly a very complex area with many different facets.

Factors such as globalisation, the free movement of goods and Internet-based trade have multiplied the opportunities and means available to those seeking to profit from breaking the law. This has naturally made law enforcement all the more challenging.

Food-related crime must be fought effectively without stifling the opportunities that free trade and the Internet bring for law-abiding operators.

Also inevitably, variations between countries in the available legislative, investigative and judicial tools, along with insufficient coordination and information sharing between national authorities, make it difficult for national law enforcers to cross borders in order to bring perpetrators to justice.

Take, for example, the seizure of a product at retail in one country, manufactured in another and labelled in a third.

In addition, the structure of criminal networks is often highly complex and difficult to penetrate.

I should add that becoming familiar with the vast amount of legislation governing the various aspects of production, handling, and marketing of food and products and substances of which food is composed or which enter into contact with food requires additional study which is not always possible – particularly if food-related crime is not one's only sphere of operation.

Yet despite this difficult backdrop, I remain optimistic about our prospects of making significant inroads towards its elimination.

It is reassuring to see what is already being done in this area and the tools which are available.

Member States have efficient departments to carry out official controls along the food chain – to detect fraudulent practices; to identify and eliminate counterfeit, defective and potentially harmful food products; and to ensure that those responsible for non-compliance take immediate action to rectify the situation.

Efficient investigative tools and judicial systems are in place to ensure that food-related crime is properly investigated; that those responsible receive appropriate punishment; and that dissuasive penalties are applied to deter future violations.

I do not believe that the challenge that lies ahead requires totally new tools. Rather, it calls for better informed, integrated and coordinated use of our skills and expertise – be it through administrative cooperation (to which, as you heard this morning, we already plan substantial improvements) or in the more sensitive field of police and judicial action.

But we are aware of the difficulties involved in making the fullest and most efficient use of the tools at our disposal. In this, cooperation is the key to success.

More efficient cooperation is only possible with full awareness and shared understanding of the problems we face and with information sharing at its fullest possible extent.

As we have heard over the last two days, those involved in the fight against food crime have already set up cooperation mechanisms across borders, across departments and between different groups of stakeholders (including industry operators, consumer groups, market surveillance and sanitary authorities, police forces and judicial bodies).

This conference will certainly contribute to a better understanding of both the issues at stake and the mechanisms in place.

The ultimate aim should be the creation of operational synergies among services and administrations across Member States, at the most appropriate levels.

This should enable all of those concerned with the fight against food-related crime to establish and maintain dialogue; to share information relevant to their work; and to maximise the impact of their actions by calling on expert advice and assistance, and – where needed – prosecution powers of their colleagues elsewhere.

It is also vital to develop partnerships between public authorities and the private sector and civil society in order to provide a cohesive response to this type of crime.

I see several ways in which this conference and the actions which will hopefully flow from it can have a durable, long-term impact.

One is by helping to raise awareness of the nature of this problem at European level.

We will explore ways of offering a forum for regular exchange of views and expertise in this area among those present here today and all those who could not attend but are involved in the daily fight against food crime.

Expert training for different groups of actors could be organised under our Better Training for Safer Food programme. We will look at possible formats and modalities for such training, taking account of knowledge levels and needs of potential trainees.

These are just some initial ideas, but the conference has presented us with a range of other possibilities which warrant consideration. For example:

- Further development of coordinated Internet surveillance structures;
- Strengthening the role of harmonised standards (such as on traceability of food) in preventing food-related crime;
- Collection of reliable and comprehensive data on the extent of the problem at EU level and costs to the EU economy;
- Provision of expert information on food safety rules and standards, tailored to the specific needs of national law enforcers;
- Creation of specialised food crime units;
- Increased contact and exchanges between different stakeholders in the food and drinks industry;

- More pan-European operations such as Opson and proposals for action within the framework of the Council of the European Union; and
- Improved circulation of information on food-related crime.

I would add that we should also, from a legislative perspective, promote a more proactive approach as regards possible fraud.

By this I mean identifying and evaluating the possibility of fraud that new legislation or decisions might provoke and building in scrutiny procedures and possibly fraud-checks in anticipation of possible problems.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

For my part, I can assure you that this topic will remain high on my agenda, and I will seek all possible avenues of cooperation with my colleagues Vice President Reding and Commissioner Semeta to ensure that we optimise the Commission's response to the food crime threat.

Finally, let me express my thanks to all of you for your attendance, for your contributions and, in advance, for your continuing efforts towards preventing and fighting food-related crime.

I wish you all a safe trip home.

End