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New Labelling Rules: Sustaining Consumer Confidence

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

Public Hearing on "*Traceability of fish products in the EU market:
rules of origin and labelling*"

Brussels, 29 June 2011

Dear Ms Fraga, Dear Mr Cadec, MEPs,

Thank you for inviting me here today. On the important subject of traceability, I have a little story for you. It's a real-life story.

Last year a European fisherman moored in the port of Liverpool and claimed to have a catch of sand sole, a relatively cheap kind of fish which he was allowed to fish. But inspectors were doubtful.

Since the catch had been cleaned and filleted, there was no way to tell what species it actually was. So the inspectors sent for a DNA test. As it turned out, it was in fact the much more expensive common sole – a species subject to strict fishing quotas. Based on this evidence, the fisherman was fined 15 000 euro by the Liverpool court.

Now, ladies and gentlemen, I'm not saying we can carry out molecular testing for every landing we check. We're not yet there anyway. But I am saying that today's technological advances open up a broad spectrum of traceability tools. And this, coupled with the new legal requirements, makes it much easier for us to tell consumers where fish come from.

Traceability systems have been supporting the implementation of all major initiatives adopted in recent years.

When we introduced the new traceability rules as part and parcel of our control and enforcement policy in 2010, we made a quantum leap toward simpler and more exhaustive controls.

These rules translate the new control approach into concrete practice. They cover every stage in the chain that sees fish caught, landed, brought to market and sold. The system allows inspectors to check and detect infringements at any stage of the supply chain - "from net to plate"!

In the Regulation against Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated fishing, the traceability principle materialises in what we call "catch certificates": every fishery product entering the EU must be accompanied by a certificate guaranteeing that it was caught in line with domestic, regional and international rules on conservation.

In addition, a better cooperation between flag States, coastal States, processing States and marketing States ensures that all fish imported into the EU are traceable. This makes the marketing of illegally-caught products in the EU extremely difficult for now and –in future– they are to make it impossible –.

In sum, if illegal products can no longer reach the EU market or any market supplied by the EU it enables us to reassure consumers that once the product reaches the stores, it is safe to buy and has been caught legally. At the same time, this offers protection for rules-abiding European fishermen against unfair competition whether from outside or within the EU.

This point about consumer information is absolutely crucial to me. People need guidance on the vast array of seafood products on the shelves and demand to make informed choices. "*Is this product fresh or defrosted?*" "*Where was it caught?*" "*Was it fished sustainably and traded fairly?*" They want to know.

And I for one think they are right. We are all entitled to reliable information about the food we buy for ourselves and our families. And that info should simply be on the label.

Now, I don't need to tell you how sensitive and complex this issue is – after all, the new regulation on food information to consumers was discussed for a long time before an agreement on all sensitive issues was reached recently. I'm glad to see this positive development.

But what I will tell you is that the imminent reform of the Common Market Organisation will complement those general foodstuff provisions and care for the peculiarities of the seafood products.

For example, we intend to go beyond the generic geographical reference prescribed by FAO, such as North-East Atlantic, and give much more understandable and precise information on where the products come from. We intend to go far beyond our own rules of 1999 by covering all products, canned and processed ones included, under new, stricter rules.

I cannot overstate that information and labelling are one of the essential aspects of the upcoming reform. This is a sensitive political issue, acknowledged as strategic by all stakeholders, and I do not intend to back down on it.

I know it will determine the degree of consumer confidence in our actions as politicians; I suspect it will be one of the end results against which the whole reform will be measured by the man in the street; and it is the most direct way to get citizens on board and make them *want* to be involved and do their own little gesture towards sustainable fishing. In the space of a few years, we citizens have gone from being '*informed*' to being '*concerned*' citizens; they are more and more aware of environmental issues and so are retailers, which demand an effective certification system for the products they offer.

It is a self-feeding circle, you see. The more transparent, understandable and accurate the labelling, the more consumers are able to favour seafood from legal, low-impact and low-waste sources. And the more they do so, the more this will reward those businesses which choose to be responsible and adhere to proper certification.

I am convinced that traceability and proper labelling will ultimately pay off for the sector, and not just in terms of image. New opportunities are emerging all the time in the context of green public procurement: more and more, certified sustainable fish products are required to supply public canteens, especially school canteens. This is a welcome development, in my view, and clearly gives a competitive edge to sustainable businesses.

Another way to increase consumer confidence is through the 'voluntary' information displayed on products. This is important for two reasons.

First of all because the voluntary commitments by private operators, such as large retail or catering companies, can be powerful market-driven tools to transition to sustainable production worldwide and to sustainable consumption in the EU. We should certainly not overlook the potential of such initiatives. At a conference last week, I learned that as of October this year fish for all fishburgers of one of the biggest fast-food chains will be certified to come from sustainable sources.

Secondly because according to stakeholders, NGOs and consumers, it is up to public authorities to check that if a product claims certain properties – be they environmental, social, nutritional or geographical – these are actually true and correct. And if they are, public authorities have a duty not to hinder market penetration by these products. I don't think we can argue with that either.

To conclude, ladies and gentlemen, I hope I have made it clear that we now have significantly more control on what enters the EU market than a few years ago. We have the technology. Traceability is just a modern way to manage complex information flows in a complex sector, and we have mastered it.

Consumers are entitled to proper information and might be getting impatient about it. We, on our end, have the responsibility to guarantee transparent and accurate labelling, both legal and voluntary, just as we have the responsibility to safeguard wild resources from overexploitation. The two go hand in hand and even influence each other to some extent.

One thing is certain: people need to read 'sustainable' before they can think 'sustainable' and buy 'sustainable'. It is up to us, with the reform, to give them this unique chance.