



Health & Consumer Voice

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Headline Story

Safer food for Europe – over a decade of achievement for the FVO _____ 1

Top stories

Official Food and Feed Controls:
an evolving role for the FVO _____ 2

Meet the inspectors _____ 3

Interview: Colm Gaynor, FVO'S Director ____ 4

In brief

Ten key facts on the FVO _____ 2

Supporting food safety with EU enlargement_ 3

Improving standards of imports _____ 3

Sharing knowledge with stakeholders ____ 3

Safer food for Europe – over a decade of achievement for the FVO

For over 10 years the EU's Food and Veterinary Office (FVO) has been working to protect the health of European consumers to ensure that they can enjoy their food with peace of mind. A department of the European Commission's Directorate-General for Health and Consumer Protection (DG SANCO), the FVO is 'the eyes and ears of the Commission', monitoring EU Member State and third country compliance with EU food safety legislation through its audits and inspections.



Home to the FVO since 2002, the award-winning building at Grange (Ireland) was designed on the idea of a cloister. It is a 'green building' both for the choice of the materials used and because it makes maximum use of natural light and ventilation.

The FVO was established in the wake of the BSE (bovine spongiform encephalopathy) crisis in 1996. Consumer confidence in European food hit an all-time low as the extent of the animal disease came to light, and as fears grew of a link to brain disease in humans. In response to the crisis, the European Commission developed a new food safety policy in 1997¹ and the FVO was established in the same year. The Commission had previously carried out inspections and controls under the remit of its Agriculture and Enterprise directorates. After the food scare, consumer safety became the main priority. The FVO therefore

found its home within DG SANCO. The yearly number of inspections carried out by the FVO has increased from some 190 in 1998 to 250 in 2007. Each year the FVO identifies priority areas and countries where verification of compliance with food safety norms is most needed, and draws up an inspection programme. This may be revised as required by developments such as food safety emergencies. The majority of inspections focus on food safety, but they also target animal health, animal welfare and plant health. This ensures that the whole production process is covered from 'farm to fork'. (...)

Key figure

2.200

inspections were carried out by the FVO over the last 10 years

¹ Commission's Green Paper on food law (COM(97)176 final)



(...) Inspections do not just take place in EU Member States – Europe is the world's biggest importer of foodstuffs and imports from over 150 countries. Over a quarter of FVO inspections take place in countries outside the EU. Following inspections, the FVO makes recommendations as necessary to the national competent authorities. The competent authority then draws up an

action plan on a national level which the FVO follows up.

In addition to inspections to verify compliance, the FVO performs general audits of Member States' national control systems, a task first performed in 2007. This new duty for the FVO is set out in the EU Regulation on Official Food and Feed Controls (see below).

Transparency is a vital part of boosting consumer confidence. With this in mind, the FVO takes its responsibility to provide information to consumers very seriously. Individual reports, country assessments, action plans and the FVO annual reports are all freely available to the general public on the DG SANCO website.

In brief



Ten key facts on the FVO

- The FVO has some 175 staff
- Many staff members have a veterinary background, as well as other specialisations: agronomy, chemistry, biology, environmental health, medicine, economics and law.
- The FVO checks compliance with EU food safety and quality, veterinary and plant health legislation within the EU.
- The FVO checks compliance with EU requirements in third countries exporting to the EU.
- The FVO carried out about 250 inspection missions in 2007.
- Most FVO missions concern food safety, but also look at animal health and welfare and plant health.
- FVO inspections to countries outside the EU account for nearly 1 in 3 missions.
- Inspections of the EU's trading partners in 2006 were dominated by fish, fish products and molluscs, and included visits to major meat-trading partners.
- The FVO is also involved in monitoring plant pests. It carries out pesticide reviews and evaluates residue control plans of third countries wanting to export food of animal origin to the EU.
- The FVO's activities provide input to the legislative process and contribute to food safety policies developed by DG SANCO.

Official Food and Feed Controls: an evolving role for the FVO



The EU Regulation on Official Food and Feed Controls, which came into force in 2006, harmonises the way controls are carried out in the EU and at its borders. In line with the EU's 'farm to fork' principle, controls are carried out at all stages of production.

Member States must develop multi-annual national control plans, contingency plans for emergency situations and meet performance criteria. In its role as the 'eyes and ears' of the Commission, the FVO will continue to carry out inspections at food production sites, especially in emergency situations and non-EU countries. But the Regulation also sees a new role for the FVO as auditor of the national control systems.

Import controls have been harmonised too. The nature and frequency of controls on food imports will be based on risk and, unlike under previous legislation, food imports of non-animal origin are now subject to controls. The new laws have radically improved Europe's food safety systems and consumers can be more confident than ever about the food they eat.

Meet the inspectors

The FVO's inspectors are at the front line of the EU's efforts to make sure that the food Europeans eat is safe. They have to be dedicated, flexible, good communicators and prepared for what are often long hours on the road. Nor, when it comes to visiting slaughterhouses, is it a job for the squeamish. But, as a number of active FVO inspectors testify it can, nonetheless, be a varied and highly rewarding job.

FVO inspectors – mostly, but not always, veterinarians by training – deal with all aspects of the food chain. Some missions will be broad-based assessment missions, to establish, for example, to what extent an EU candidate country meets EU standards for producing food of plant origin. Other missions will be more specific, perhaps relating to a given problem or commodity – one that could even cause the European Commission to restrict exports of certain goods from a particular country. No two FVO missions are likely to be exactly the same.

FVO inspector Beatrice Bussi recently visited a country in the Balkans that was interested in exporting certain commodities to the EU: “We visited the local cattle, and the slaughterhouses, because the country had selected a number of slaughterhouses which claimed to be compliant with EU standards for export. So it was not a ‘usual’ type of inspection, because normally we go either to a Member State or third country that is already exporting. This was a ‘pre-assessment’ mission.”

Missions typically take 1-2 weeks, plus detailed preparation and follow-up. Missions can be both to EU and

to non-EU countries. They can take inspectors (at least two accompanied by national representatives) to some interesting parts of the world: but it is certainly not all five-star hotels and swimming pools. Paul Veroveren speaks from 16 years' experience: “It's rather demanding, very often long distances by car and not always very relaxing because in some countries the driving is not always very easy.”

As inspector Andrew Owen-Griffiths explains, people skills are vital on these trips: “You might be meeting a minister and, in the same day, you might be speaking to a worker in a peanut factory... To be able to get information out of a minister in the morning and a peanut worker in the afternoon requires very good communication skills.”

Despite the demands of the job, it clearly has its upside – as John McEvoy confirms: “I would say the best part of the job is being able to make a difference... If you visit a country where things are terrible, and they put in place an action plan to address their deficiencies, then you go back there a couple of years later and you actually see a demonstrable improvement, that's actually quite satisfying.”



Inspector
Beatrice Bussi



Inspector
Andrew Owen-Griffiths



Inspector
John McEvoy

In brief



Supporting food safety with EU enlargement

In the run-up to the EU's significant enlargement of May 2004, when 10 countries joined, FVO inspectors were busy visiting the new entrants to help them make sure their food sectors were up to EU standards. The FVO missions helped them assess, for example, whether slaughterhouses and dairy plants complied with EU rules. If not, such plants had to upgrade or face closure. This meant some initial pain for the new EU members, but long-term gain for the safety of their, and the EU's, food. The 10 'new' and 15 'old' Member States are now on a par in terms of the distribution of inspections. The FVO helped steward the food safety aspects of Bulgaria's and Romania's January 2007 EU accession in a similar fashion.

Improving standards of imports

Where FVO inspections find non-compliances with EU requirements, the report on the inspection contains recommendations on the actions required to correct these deficiencies. Following implementation of action plans, based on these recommendations, many third countries, particularly less developed countries, have been successful in improving standards to a point where they meet these requirements and securing access to the EU market for their products.

Sharing knowledge with stakeholders

FVO officials regularly share their knowledge and experience with stakeholders through participation in conferences and seminars. FVO officials contribute to the “Better Training for Safer Food” initiative by assisting in identifying training needs following their inspections and, for some specialist courses, participating as tutors.

Interview: Colm Gaynor, FVO's Director



Colm Gaynor, the FVO's Director, looks back on achievements over the past decade, and ahead to future challenges.

What have been the main achievements of the FVO over the last 10 years?

The Food and Veterinary Office was born out of a lot of difficult times, but it really became settled over the last 10 years. During this time we have put in place a transparent inspection system in which European citizens can have confidence and that has been our main achievement. Our approach is to be systematic about what we look at in Member States and third countries and to produce a programme that everybody can see – it's on the Internet before we even start the year. We also make our reports freely available and easy to be consulted by anyone to ensure that the public has confidence in the system.

How safe is our food, and is it safer than it was 10 years ago?

I think it's definitely safer than it was 10 years ago. You can never completely eliminate risk. But our job is to see that the various components which mitigate the risk at the different steps in the food chain are being operated correctly by the Member States and third countries, so that ultimately the risk is as low as is practical and possible. Food in Europe is very safe and consumers should have confidence in this.

Why do you think that it's important for the FVO to be part of the Commission, rather than an agency?

This was considered extensively in the 1990s. The reality is that the work that we do often requires immediate and complete action. In the context of an agency and the

structures which an agency represents, the time to react would be too long. In the FVO, we report to our colleagues in Brussels, the Commission considers the best action, and it is implemented. We might return from our mission on the Monday and action could take place the following day.

The Regulation on Official Food and Feed Controls (OFFC) came into force at the start of 2006. How has this affected the FVO?

Prior to 2006 we might carry out 12 different missions to a Member State – one might be on pesticides, another on swine fever, another on red meat establishments etc. The OFFC Regulation requires us to look at each Member State in a holistic way and produce a general audit and a report of that audit. We still look at individual sectors, but at the end we form one view and report on it.

Does that mean there will be fewer sectoral missions or on-site inspections?

No, not at all. In fact, there will be as many. It doesn't mean there isn't as much still to do. It's a new way of compiling the results to give a more complete picture.

Has the OFFC Regulation affected the number of third country inspections?

There's a constant demand to ensure that the food imported to Europe meets EU requirements. Over the last five years we have increased our presence in countries outside Europe; the number of third country missions has increased from around 18% of all annual missions at one stage, to around 30% today.

What do you foresee to be the main challenges ahead for the FVO?

I certainly think that the OFFC Regulation has mapped it out for us. Our main challenge will be to integrate all audits on Member States into a single view across the different sectors. The second challenge will be to support the development of national audit systems in the Member States. If they are functioning well we will have more resources to devote to imports into Europe.

Where do you see the FVO 10 years from now?

I think the focus for the FVO – if Member States implement the national audit systems correctly – will be to ensure that we have a comprehensive overview of the operation of control systems and the level of compliance across all Member States. This will enable us to identify and share best practices. But there will always be the need to go on the spot to reassure the system and to inform policy-makers of our views. With increasing world trade and globalisation, there will be a need for a far greater emphasis on third country inspections.

Further information:

The DG SANCO website on food safety:

http://ec.europa.eu/food/index_en.htm

The EU Regulation on Official Food and Feed Controls:

http://ec.europa.eu/food/food/controls/index_en.htm

The European Commission's White Paper on Food Safety:

http://ec.europa.eu/food/food/intro/white_paper_en.htm

The FVO webpages:

http://ec.europa.eu/food/fvo/index_en.htm



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