

From farm to fork

Safe food for Europe's consumers



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The strategy: from farm to fork

Europe's consumers want food that is safe and wholesome. The concern of the European Union is to make sure that the food we eat is of the same high standard for all its citizens, whether the food is home-grown or comes from another country, inside or outside the EU.

Work to improve food safety is going on all the time, but there has in addition been a major overhaul in the last couple of years. This was a response to headline-hitting food safety scares in the 1990s about such things as 'mad cow' disease, dioxin-contaminated feed and adulterated olive oil. The purpose was not just to make sure that EU food

safety laws were as up-to-date as possible, but also that consumers have as much information as possible about potential risks and what is being done to minimise them.

There is no such thing as zero risk, but the EU does its utmost, through a comprehensive food safety strategy, to keep risks to a minimum with the help of modern food and hygiene standards drawn up to reflect the most advanced scientific knowledge. Food safety starts on the farm. The rules apply from farm to fork, whether our food is produced in the EU or is imported from elsewhere in the world.

Tagging animals helps keep track of our food from farm to fork.



There are four important elements to the EU's food safety strategy:

- rules on the safety of food and animal feed;
- independent and publicly available scientific advice;
- action to enforce the rules and control the processes;
- recognition of the consumer's right to make choices based on complete information about where food has come from and what it contains.

Room for diversity

Food safety does not mean food uniformity. The system for ensuring food safety is common to all EU countries, but it allows for diversity. There is a place for traditional foods and local specialities. In fact, the EU actively promotes diversity and quality. It protects distinctive or traditional foods associated with certain regions or certain production methods from being unfairly copied by others, and it promotes organic farming.

When new members join

When a country prepares to join the EU, it often has to make a major and costly effort to comply with the rules and to upgrade its processing and handling facilities. Often, it will receive financial assistance from the EU to make the necessary changes in good time. In exceptional cases, the EU may allow a transitional period in which to complete upgrading after a country has joined the Union. This is why exceptions – mainly for plants processing meat and fish – currently apply in the Czech Republic, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia.

The latest deadline for catching up is December 2007. Meanwhile, food from plants that have still to finish their upgrading can only be sold in the country where it is produced. Consumers in that country can easily recognise these products because they must carry a stamp indicating that they come from facilities not yet complying with EU rules.

Making food safe: a comprehensive set of standards

The first rules on food safety date from the very early days of the EU. The food safety crises of the 1990s showed it was time to replace what had become a patchwork of rules with a simpler and more comprehensive approach. The new approach also paid closer attention to the risks from contaminated feed.

The result was a new piece of 'umbrella' legislation known as the General Food Law, to be phased in between 2002 and 2005. This law not only set out the principles applying to food safety. It also:

- set up the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) to bring under one roof the work previously done by a range of scientific committees and to make the scientific risk assessment process more public.
 - reinforced the rapid alert system which the European Commission and EU governments use to act quickly in the event of a food and/or feed safety scare.
- introduced the concept of 'traceability'. In other words, food and feed businesses – whether they are producers, processors or importers – must make sure that all foodstuffs, animal feed and feed ingredients can be traced right through the food chain, from farm to fork. Each business must be able to identify its supplier and which businesses it supplied. This is known as the 'one-step-backward, one-step-forward' approach.



We want our children's food to be wholesome and healthy.

Producers and processors must also comply with a large number of rules on specific issues. The point of all these rules is to make sure that food is as safe as is technically possible, to keep consumers informed and to give them as much choice as possible.

Depending on the issue, this can mean that the EU adopts a single set of standards or that the member states agree to recognise each other's standards. Differences in detail may not matter if the end result is the same.

Food and feed standards

A careful watch is kept over what can go into our food when it is grown or produced, and when it is processed. This starts with animal feed, i.e. what is fed to farm animals which produce (or become) our food.

Food scares of the last decade have highlighted the risks of contamination from certain types of feed, especially those used in intensive farming. As a result, EU policy-making now places decisive emphasis on protecting human and animal health. It is forbidden to sell animal feed materials which

could represent any danger to human or animal health, or to the environment. Labels must show clearly what the farmer is buying.

Similarly, chemical additives are banned unless they have been approved for use in foods. Approval means first undergoing extensive evaluation by the European Food Safety Authority. But even being found safe by EFSA is not necessarily enough to guarantee a green light. The EU only gives the go-ahead if it is convinced that the additive serves a useful purpose and that using it will not mislead consumers.

Specific rules apply to food additives, such as colours, sweeteners, emulsifiers, stabilisers and thickeners, and gelling agents. Other rules govern the levels of minerals and vitamins in food supplements, concentration limits for minerals in bottled water, and the composition of special foods. These include baby food and food for weight reduction, for special medical purposes and for sportspeople. These rules not only cover what these foods can contain, but what the label must say about the ingredients.

In order to avoid any risk to public health, the EU is equally strict about the amount of pesticide or residues from veterinary medicines still remaining in food when it is put on sale to the consumer. The use of hormones to promote growth in animals is banned.

In addition, there are standards for materials which come into contact with foodstuffs, particularly plastics, to make sure they cannot contaminate the food. EU rules permit irradiation of herbs and spices to ensure microbiological safety. Some member states allow irradiation of some other foods to extend their shelf life or reduce health hazards. However, use of the technique is strictly regulated and, in any case, not widespread.

Animal health and welfare

If food is to be safe, the animals it comes from must be healthy. The EU takes very seriously the need to keep animals healthy through good veterinary practice and to prevent outbreaks of contagious animal diseases, such as foot-and-mouth disease and swine fever, or bird flu. If an outbreak does occur, it is carefully monitored and steps are taken to prevent it spreading.

To prevent diseased animals entering the food chain, all animals and animal products must meet strict health requirements before they can be imported into or traded within the Union. EU rules also require farm animals to be identified so that they can



The EU is working to improve animal welfare.

be traced. They may, for example, have to be registered, tagged or be accompanied by a passport – depending on the type of animal concerned.

A computerised network enables veterinary authorities across the EU to exchange information about movements of live animals, semen, embryos, animal products and animal waste within the Union.

It is a principle underlying EU policy that animals should not be subjected to avoidable pain or suffering. Research shows that farm animals are healthier, and produce better food, if they are well treated and able to behave naturally. Physical stress (e.g. from being kept, transported or slaughtered in poor conditions) can adversely affect not only the health of the animal but also the quality of meat.

Increasing numbers of European consumers are concerned about the welfare of the animals that provide them with their meat, eggs and dairy products. This is reflected in clear rules on the conditions in which hens, pigs and calves may be reared and in which farm animals can be transported and killed. These rules are regularly updated in the light of new scientific data.

Feed and food hygiene

Meeting food and feed standards has no point if the food is produced or handled in unhygienic conditions. Low standards of food hygiene are an invitation to the spread, for example, of salmonella and listeria, which cause food poisoning. Salmonella gets far less publicity than BSE, but is in fact more of a threat: found in a whole range of food products, such as raw eggs, poultry, pork and beef, it kills several hundred people each year and infects tens of thousands more.

The EU has specific rules dealing with some of these threats and general hygiene rules for all food and feed, updated as part of the overhaul of food safety rules in the last few years. Food businesses must identify each point in the production process critical to food safety. Once that is done, they must put in place, maintain and constantly review their safety procedures.

Some exemptions are allowed for smaller producers, or those in remote areas serving local markets, as the cost of these measures could be a threat to the survival of their business. Producers who are exempted from the hygiene rules can only sell their produce locally and only if the label indicates that normal rules do not apply.

Assessing the risk: sound science for state-of-the-art policies

When drawing up its policy on food safety and the acceptable level of risk, the EU takes decisions based on sound scientific advice and the latest technological developments. The European Commission consults the Standing Committee on the Food Chain and Animal Health, on which all EU countries are represented.

Because new foods and new production methods are emerging all the time, the EU constantly evaluates and re-evaluates the risks posed by new food-stuffs. The European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) set up in 2002 plays a central role in this process.

The role of EFSA

EFSA is responsible for advising the EU institutions, and in particular the European Commission, on all scientific aspects of food and feed production, processing and marketing. Its work covers a wide field including nutrition, genetically modified organisms (GMOs), animal health, animal welfare and plant health. EFSA provides EU decision-makers with scientific advice in a more efficient and transparent way than in the past.



Testing is a vital part of safe food production.

Once EFSA has provided scientific advice, it is then primarily up to the European Commission to decide how to respond. EU governments and the European Parliament have given the Commission the authority to take direct action if the risk is immediate. The Commission may, for example, in these circumstances impose conditions for marketing food or feed. It may restrict or even ban the sale of the food or feed concerned. These and other operational decisions are discussed with the member states in the Standing Committee on the Food Chain and Animal Health.

Treating genetically modified products with caution

The careful weighing of risk can be seen in the way the EU approaches biotechnology. Very few GMOs or products derived from GMOs have been authorised in the EU, and every one of those has gone through a careful process of individual assessment by independent scientists, now including those working with EFSA. These scientists have concluded that these GMOs and GM products do not have any known adverse effects on human health.

The precautionary principle

Before taking a policy decision about whether a food or feed product is safe to eat or whether to allow a particular ingredient or additive, the EU looks at the scientific advice. In managing the risk, the EU applies the 'precautionary principle': if there are reasonable grounds for suspecting there is a problem, the Commission acts to limit the risk. It does not necessarily need to wait for proof that there really is a risk.

Of course, this principle must not be wrongly used as an excuse for a protectionist measure. Where the scientists have not conclusively established the nature of the risk, they must at least have identified potentially dangerous effects before the Commission can justifiably use the precautionary principle to take measures relating to a feed or food product.

Any action the Commission takes must target only the potential risk. It must be non-discriminatory – in other words it must affect all producers equally. It must be based on an examination of the costs and benefits of action and failure to act, and must be provisional while work continues on obtaining greater scientific certainty.

Approval is needed before any research into genetically modified feed or food can begin, and before any GMO can be released into the environment or be included in a product for marketing. The rules are the same for feed as for food, and there is a 10-year time limit on authorisations. The strict procedures involved include widespread public consultation.

Food, food ingredients and feed labels must indicate if the product comes from or contains genetically modified material even when the use of the technology cannot be detected in the end product, as with some table oil.

The only exceptions to the 'must label' rule are where there is only a trace of genetically modified material which falls below a very low minimum content threshold. These thresholds acknowledge a reality with which the policy must work: it is virtually impossible for any product to be 100% free of genetically modified material. Minute traces of GMOs or GM products can get into conventional food and feed during cultivation, harvest, transport or processing.



Food safety begins on the farm.



Baby food must be especially safe.

Funding research into food safety

In the interests of sound science, the EU spends tens of millions of euro annually on finding new ways of preventing or detecting more quickly outbreaks of animal diseases, and supporting work on new and better crops. There is a €685 million budget solely for food quality and safety research between 2002 and 2006.

This money is primarily going into investigating:

- when and where food-related diseases and allergies occur most,
- the relationship between food and health,
- traceability along the food chain,
- methods of analysis,
- detection and control of threats to food safety,
- safer and more environment-friendly production methods and technologies,
- healthier foodstuffs,
- the way in which animal feed can ultimately affect human health, and
- the role of environmental factors in health.

Keeping consumers safe: enforcement and control

Since the 1990s, the EU has also been overhauling the third element of its food safety strategy – its system for ensuring compliance with food safety laws. The changes are designed to clarify who does what, and to provide consumers with the same level of protection wherever they live.

There has been a shift in focus away from regular, but random, sampling to paying more attention to the sources of greatest risk. Risk may be high because a particular product is traded in large quantities, or because a product or the area it comes from is known to be susceptible to a particular plant or animal disease.

The EU is also taking a broader view of what food safety is. Rather than concentrating just on contamination, the EU authorities are now extending the

scope of their checks to look more systematically at whether products comply with consumer information requirements and with the rules on what foodstuffs may and may not contain.

The Food and Veterinary Office (FVO), which is an arm of the European Commission based at Grange in Ireland, plays an important role in verifying whether the rules are being enforced. The FVO's team of some 100 inspectors travels the length and breadth not only of the EU but also of the world, to check whether adequate control and enforcement mechanisms are in place. As part of these on-the-spot checks, the inspectors may visit producers or processing plants to establish that these mechanisms are effective in practice. If necessary, the FVO can send out inspectors in response to disease outbreaks both within and outside the EU.

Rapid alert system

The rapid alert system for food and feed (RASFF) provides rapid information on newly identified risks to the consumer. When an EU government spots a food or feed item which it thinks could put consumers at risk, it uses this network to spread information on the potential risk and the action it has taken to stop the item entering the food chain. This ensures that the risk is publicised throughout the EU very quickly and that authorities in other countries can take swift action if they think their own citizens are also at risk.

Alerts are issued for reasons ranging from discovery of salmonella in meat to the use of dangerous colourings in spices, from mercury in fish to food imports from unauthorised processing plants. The European Commission is the hub of a network which includes national authorities and EFSA. It publishes the alerts on the internet.

Keeping consumers informed: labelling for safety

People want, and have a right, to know what they are eating. Food labelling rules recognise that right. The fundamental principle of EU food labelling rules is that consumers should be given all essential information on the composition of the product, the manufacturer, methods of storage and preparation. Producers and manufacturers are free to provide additional information if they wish, but this must be accurate, not mislead the consumer and not claim that any foodstuff can prevent, treat or cure illness.

The labelling requirements are regularly updated to reflect advances in science and changing consumer expectations. Recent changes reflect public concern over, for example, BSE ('mad cow' disease): consumers want the fullest possible information about the beef they buy. Beef labels now have to show where the animal was born, reared, fattened, slaughtered and cut.



Clear information for consumers is essential.

Consumers also want to know whether a food contains a genetically modified product and to see from the label whether a food ingredient might trigger an allergy – other reasons for recent changes. If a food contains a GM product, or if a product derived from GM material was involved in producing it, then the label must say so.

Special rules apply to certain food-stuffs. For example, the presence of quinine and caffeine in food must be clearly indicated.

The challenge in designing modern food labelling rules is to strike a balance between giving consumers as much information as possible and not overloading the label with information that makes it difficult to read and understand.

Understanding health claims

The EU recognises that consumers do not just want safe food, they also want food which is nutritious. Moreover, good nutrition is of growing importance to EU public health policy. Obesity is spreading. A healthy diet is an important element in reversing this trend. The EU has no intention of micro-managing what people eat or dictating their lifestyle, but it does have a role in helping the European public take informed decisions and ensuring that claims are truthful and scientifically based.

The European Commission's work in this area includes defining permissible nutrition claims (such as the use of terms like 'low fat' or 'high fibre') and setting up an authorisation system for health claims.

Protection from food allergies and food intolerance

The proportion of the population suffering from food allergies or food intolerance (to peanuts or lactose, for example) is increasing. Some 8% of children and 3% of adults now suffer from a food allergy or food intolerance. Better labelling helps these people avoid those foodstuffs or ingredients which provoke a reaction. In the past, it was not compulsory to label components of any compound ingredient making up less than 25% of the final product. From 2005, all ingredients must be listed. There will be a very limited number of exceptions to this rule, but an ingredient known to be a potential source of allergy or intolerance must always be listed.

Reforming the EU's approach to agriculture

The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) has always sought to guarantee the safety of the food we eat. However, in the early years, there was a greater emphasis on ensuring that the EU had sufficient food, in bad years as well as good.

The CAP also aimed to provide a steady income for farmers by guaranteeing that there would always be a market for their products, even if that meant buying up and storing any surplus. As the years went by, this approach became excessively costly, producing 'lakes' of surplus milk and wine, and 'mountains' of surplus beef and butter that were purchased, stored and to some extent disposed of at the EU's expense.

One of the ways in which the EU disposed of these surpluses was to export them at subsidised prices in order to sell them at the (lower) world market price. Many major exporting countries felt this competition was unfair and was distorting world trade.

To take account of these pressures and of EU enlargement, a series of reforms have been introduced. The principles and long-term spending limits were set out in a policy document known as 'Agenda 2000'. A major package of reforms was also agreed in 2003. Export subsidies are being scaled back.

The overall effect is to make EU farmers more reliant on the market and to give them greater incentives for farming in an environmentally friendly way. Farmers also now have greater freedom to produce what they want, because the financial support they receive is linked not to production but to respect for environmental, animal health and welfare standards and to their individual financial needs.

Agenda 2000 was also a turning point in making rural development an integral part of agricultural policy. In future, the CAP budget will increasingly be used to help make sure the rural way of life is sustainable – for example, by creating other jobs in rural areas and maintaining the countryside for people to enjoy.

Food safety begins on our farms

There are more than 10 million farmers in the EU. This represents 5.4% of all employment. Farming generates many more jobs in surrounding communities and in feed and food processing. A significant amount of the food we eat comes from EU farms.

As a reaction to the food shortages during and after World War II, the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) initially encouraged, above all, the production of plenty of food in order to reach self-sufficiency. Broadly speaking, the more farmers produced the more financial support they

received. Over time, this policy created some over-supply at a high cost to the taxpayer and sometimes had the effect of channelling funding to farmers who did not really need it.

A recognition of this problem coincided with growing worries about whether the CAP was encouraging intensive farming methods which had implications for the environment and food safety. This prompted a reform of the CAP, which is moving away from payment for production and towards direct payments to farmers to support their incomes. The additional advantage of

Thriving rural communities are important.





© EFA

Times are changing for European farmers.

this approach is that payments can be used as an incentive to farmers to:

- produce safe food in hygienic conditions,
- maintain high standards of animal welfare,
- use environmentally sound production methods,
- promote a sustainable rural economy.

- an acceptable cost to the taxpayer,
- allowing other countries fair access to EU markets for their produce and food,
- a competitive food industry.

This new approach is seen as the best means of combining a number of objectives:

- reasonable incomes for farmers,
- fair prices and safe food of high quality for consumers,

The EU now places less emphasis on quantity than in the past and more on maintaining quality and on the role and incomes of individual farmers. For example, the EU provides support for farmers who take part in schemes designed to improve and assure the quality of agricultural products and production processes.

Safe food from around the world

The EU is the world's largest importer of food and the largest market for imports of food from developing countries. It imports feed, food, plants and animals from over 200 countries. Farms and food producers in non-EU countries who export to the EU must respect the same safety principles as apply in the EU. Checks are run at EU frontiers to stop unsafe food slipping in.

The EU is sometimes accused of using its ever higher food standards as a means of keeping imports out. This is not true: the EU has made a political choice not to compromise over food safety rules. That applies as much to its own member states as it does to other countries wanting to export to the EU. Food safety begins on the farm wherever the food comes from

In addition, the EU works with other countries in international organisations on drawing up adequate international food safety rules, since the fairest solution is for standards to be at the same high level worldwide. This makes it easier for countries exporting to the EU, and indeed for the EU's own food industry exporting to the rest of the world. In this work, the EU always pushes for the highest possible standards, not just of food safety, but of environmental protection, rural development, sustainable production and animal welfare.

The EU realises that meeting these standards can be difficult and costly for developing countries, so it provides technical assistance to help them meet its own standards. This assistance can indirectly benefit the countries concerned by improving their own food standards and health, thus reducing the number of deaths from contaminated food and water. Every year, nearly two million children in developing countries die from these causes.

The EU also contributes to awareness-raising campaigns that encourage EU consumers to buy 'fair trade' products – in other words foodstuffs which are not only safe but which, in addition, come from producers who have been paid a fair price and which have been handled and processed by workers who receive fair treatment.

When exported to the EU, these crabs will come under careful scrutiny.



© Tom Swartz/Van Praag Media

Beyond safety: quality and diversity

EU consumers want safe food: they also want quality food. In addition, they want the EU to respect the diverse cultures and cuisines within its borders. The EU recognises this and has developed four 'quality logos'.

The logos for **protected designations of origin** and **protected geographical indications** (PDOs and PGIs) both apply to agricultural products or foodstuffs with a strong link to a specific region or place.



Where a product carries the **PGI** logo, it has a specific characteristic or reputation associating it with a given area, and at least one stage in the production, processing and preparation process is carried out in that area. Examples are 'Clare Island Salmon', 'Arancia Rossa di Sicilia' and 'Dortmunder Bier'. This means that the only foodstuffs which can use those names are salmon from Clare Island in Ireland, blood oranges from Sicily and beer from the Dortmund area of Germany that meet particular quality specifications.



A product bearing the **PDO** logo has proven characteristics which can only result from the natural environment and abilities of producers in the region of production with which it is associ-

ated. Examples are 'Huile d'olive de Nyons', 'Queijo Serra da Estrela' and 'Shetland lamb'. In other words, only olive oil from a recognised area in the vicinity of Nyons in France, cheese from the designated area of Serra da Estrela in Portugal, and lamb from Scotland's Shetland Islands meeting exacting requirements can qualify to use the logo.



The **traditional speciality guaranteed** (TSG) logo is used for products with distinctive features and which either have traditional ingredients or are made using traditional methods. Among the products in this group are 'Kalakukko' bread, 'Jamón Serrano' and 'Kriek' beer. These have been registered by Finland, Spain and Belgium respectively.



The **organic farming** logo means that the foodstuff has been produced using approved organic methods that respect the environment and high standards of animal husbandry. In particular, farmers avoid the use of synthetic pesticides and chemical fertilisers.

A safe basis for diversity and excellence

Food safety is about minimising risk. The Union takes very seriously its responsibility for managing and controlling risk in a constantly changing global food market. It makes decisions based on sound science that is transparent for everyone, whether scientists, farmers, food producers or consumers.

At the same time, the EU believes food safety standards should promote, not limit, choice and quality. The aim is not to stifle innovation or homogenise the

vast array of foodstuffs available on the European market, but to lay down the fundamental standards of safety to serve as a basis on which quality and excellence can grow and thrive.

Risk can never be totally eliminated. However, by setting high standards, by constantly evaluating risk and by drawing on the best available independent scientific advice, the EU can boast a state-of-the-art food safety policy.



An enlarged EU means greater diversity at the same high standard.

Further reading



White Paper on food safety:

europa.eu.int/comm/dgs/health_consumer/library/pub/pub06_en.pdf

Consumer Voice (magazine on EU consumer policy):

europa.eu.int/comm/dgs/health_consumer/library/pub/index_en.html

The European Commission's food safety website:

europa.eu.int/comm/food/index_en.html

The European Commission's agriculture and food website:

europa.eu.int/comm/agriculture/foodqual/index_en.htm

The European Food Safety Authority website:

efsa.eu.int

The rapid alert system for food and feed website:

europa.eu.int/comm/food/food/rapidalert/index_en.htm

European Commission

From farm to fork
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Food safety is a top priority in Europe. The EU's demanding rules have been further toughened since 2000 to ensure that Europeans' food is extremely safe. The new approach is more integrated: feed and food are carefully tracked from the farm to the fork. EU authorities carefully evaluate risk and always seek the best possible scientific advice before banning or permitting any product, ingredient, additive or GMO. This applies to all feed and food, irrespective of whether it comes from inside or outside the EU.

Safety does not mean uniformity. The EU promotes diversity based on quality. European law protects traditional foods and products from specific regions by ensuring consumers can distinguish them from copies. The European Union is increasingly encouraging its farmers to focus on quality – not just in food but also in the rural environment.

The EU also respects the consumer's right to informed choice. It encourages public debate, it requires informative labelling and it publishes the scientific advice it receives, so that consumers can have confidence in the food they eat.

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The European Union



-  Member states of the European Union
-  Candidate countries



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