

AGRICULTURE COUNCIL BRUSSELS

OUTBREAK OF THE SHIGA-TOXIN PRODUCING E. COLI (STEC)

TUESDAY 7 JUNE 2011

SPEAKING NOTE

PRESS CONFERENCE

To start with let me express once again my condolences to those who are suffering as a result of the death and disease that has been caused by this outbreak.

In the current phase of the crisis, we need to focus all our efforts on

- Supporting the patients suffering from the disease;
- Rapidly identifying the source;
- Ensuring right information to the public;
- fighting disproportionate trade restriction.

There are now over 1755 Shiga toxin producing E coli cases, and serious complications have developed in at least 674 people and 22 deaths in Germany plus one in Sweden.

Sporadic cases are reported in eleven other Member States. Switzerland has also reported fifteen cases and the United States four.

The Commission is using all of the tools at its disposal, and is working very hard with national health and food safety ministries, to support them in containing this outbreak.

In dealing with this outbreak, the importance of rigorous science and coordinated, transparent communication, broad and deep investigations, cannot be overemphasised. This is a message that was also echoed by the numerous interventions in the European Parliament this morning.

We need to be sure that the advice and information we put into the public domain can stand up to rigorous scrutiny. We must be transparent, but in trying to quench this thirst for information we must not draw premature conclusions.

It is vitally important that the Member States introduce well-substantiated and scientifically-based alerts into the RASFF, and to trigger RASFF when Member states are confident of the scientific evidence supporting the alert notification.

I would like to stress again that the outbreak is limited geographically to an area surrounding the city of Hamburg so there is no reason, as of today, to take such measures at European level.

In the light of this, and also the steps towards the identification of the source, we consider any ban on any product as disproportionate.

We are in constant contact with third countries, in particular Russia, in order to ask them to lift their ban which is considered disproportionate.

I cannot emphasise how important it is that we work together, cooperate and share expertise to address this outbreak and bring it to an end as soon as possible: the European consumer has the right to feel confident about the food they eat. We can, and must, do everything we can to ensure them that the food they eat is safe in order to avoid any more loss of human life and further suffering.

Once the crisis is over, we must learn the lessons from this outbreak; look at our systems, look at what options and possibilities there are; and where changes may be needed, or improvements can be made, in order to emerge stronger and more prepared for the future.

But now is not the time for recriminations. This is time for cooperation and solidarity.