

**EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, ENVI COMMITTEE**

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

**TUESDAY 14 JUNE 2011**

**SPEAKING NOTE**

Chairman, Honourable Members,

I am grateful for this opportunity to update the Committee on the latest developments in relation to the outbreak of E. coli, following my statement at the Plenary last week.

All of us are very concerned about the heavy burden of death and disease that this food borne epidemic has caused. Let me once again express my condolences to those who are suffering as a result.

The situation continues to evolve. There are now 3,337 Shiga toxin producing E. coli cases reported in the EU, Norway and Switzerland; with 818 people developing serious complications.

According to the latest information, this outbreak is responsible for 35 deaths in Germany and one in Sweden.

Unfortunately, we are likely to see additional deaths in the coming days because of the incubation period of the disease, and where treatment may not been able to save those badly affected.

The epicentre of the disease remains the area around Hamburg in northern Germany. Most of the cases reported outside Germany concern either German nationals travelling or persons who visited the country.

Let me turn now to what the European Commission is doing to tackle the outbreak.

First, we immediately activated all our networks responsible for managing crises – when we received the first notification from Germany on 22 May.

The networks have been in daily contact and allow for the timely exchange of information; laying the ground for rapid action.

The Commission holds almost daily meetings with your public health authorities and Food Safety Authorities to discuss the evolution of the outbreak; the health measures taken to prevent infection; and the treatment of affected people.

The Early Warning and Response System and the Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed have provided a solid basis for exchanging information.

Second, we asked the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control to undertake a scientific risk assessment which is being updated as the situation evolves.

The ECDC has also developed, together with the European Food Safety Authority, advice on preventive measures addressed to the public. This advice is now available in all official languages on the Commission website.

We have asked the ECDC to urgently set up a platform to exchange best practice on treatment, involving both Member States and professional societies.

The Commission has also asked the European Food Safety Authority to provide urgent advice on several issues – including the role of surface and internal contamination of fresh vegetables and possible risk mitigation measures.

EFSA has already delivered this advice – in just a couple of days. One of the main recommendations is to ensure the best possible hygiene throughout the food chain.

EFSA was also able to give an overview, where the serotype 0104 has been isolated in previous years. This was possible due to the continuous monitoring of trends and sources of food borne pathogens introduced in 2003 in all Member States.

Last but not least, the assistance of EFSA experts as of 10 days ago in co-ordinating the epidemiological investigation of Germany, has played a crucial role in the breakthrough announced last week identifying sprouted seeds as the source of the outbreak.

Our food safety EU reference laboratory in Rome (which I visited last week) developed – in record time – a method that reduces the time needed to detect the E. coli bacterium in food, from about six days to 48 hours.

Let me also stress the importance of public perception. The Commission draws up daily "updates", shared with the Health Security Committee Communicators' network and Food Safety Authorities.

In addition, the Commission keeps its website dedicated to this outbreak up-to-date.

I would strongly urge Honourable Members to support this science based communication to the public in order to reduce unnecessary fears, and to reinforce our common efforts.

Honourable Members can be assured that the Commission, together with its Agencies, continues to work very hard with national health and food safety ministries, to support them in containing this outbreak.

On Sunday 5 June, experts in epidemiology of food borne diseases from the Commission and EFSA went to Germany to assist German Authorities with the ongoing epidemiology and to contribute to the ongoing investigations to identify the source.

On Monday 6 June, the situation was discussed with Ministers at the Health Council. I asked Germany to reinforce surveillance, outbreak controls and measures in order to identify the source of the outbreak and halt the spread of the infection; and also that the causes of the contamination be swiftly dealt with.

On Tuesday 7 June, we discussed the outbreak at the European Parliament Plenary meeting where it was stressed that all efforts needed to be focused on identifying the source of contamination.

It was also made clear that messages to the broader public, whether they come from experts or politicians, need to be based on scientific facts, to help reduce unnecessary public fear.

On that same day Commissioner Ciolos and I addressed the Agriculture Council in Luxembourg, organised by the Hungarian Presidency specifically to discuss the *E.Coli* outbreak and its financial consequences.

On Wednesday 8 June, I attended the meeting of the German Ministers of Health and Agriculture, including those from all Länder, and visited the crisis team in Berlin. I emphasised the need for strong co-operation between the central and federal competent authorities and on correct, evidence-based communication.

On Friday 10 June, and based on extensive epidemiological investigation, the German authorities announced they were able to link one farm, producing various types of bean sprouts, to food establishments where consumers ate food and subsequently fell ill.

On Saturday June 11, the German authorities announced that the findings were confirmed by the outcome of laboratory testing. The specific E. coli strain (O104), which is responsible for the outbreak affecting humans, was detected in bean sprouts from this one farm.

I am sure that Honourable Members will join me in welcoming this extremely important development. The source of contamination is now identified and the epidemiological findings are backed by laboratory results.

Epidemiological investigations will continue in order to complete the picture of the links between people who fell ill, food establishments and the farm in Germany. In the next few days, investigations will also focus on how the specific E. coli strain (O104) got into the food chain.

As I have already stated, the Commission will – along with Member States – draw lessons from this crisis on how to improve further the use of our alert and response systems.

It is crucial that national authorities do not rush to give information on alleged sources of infection unless supported by robust evidence. We need to be cautious not to spread unjustified fears in the population all over Europe and create problems for our food producers in selling products in the EU and outside.

This outbreak illustrates the importance for Member States to investigate thoroughly the possible sources of contamination, and introduce well-substantiated alerts into the RASFF

Having said that though, as I have stated in Parliament, we have also to make sure that in all our decisions and reactions we don't instil the type of fear in the decision makers not to take the decisions that, through also the precautionary concept, should be taken to protect the health of their citizens.

If we manage to do this, then we can learn from the lessons of this crisis, and improve further how we operate our systems. Co-ordination and clear lines of information and communication remain the core of our ability to be effective in such situations. We have to learn lessons on this front.

Before closing, I would like to raise my concern relating to current bans on certain products.

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 the identification of the source, we consider any ban on any product to be disproportionate.

Meanwhile, the Commission Services have been working hard to implement the political agreement reached on Friday 10 June, between President Barroso and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, at the Russia-EU summit in Nizhny Novgorod.

This agreement provided for the lifting of the Russian ban on EU vegetable imports and the introduction of guaranties.

As soon as the agreement was struck, the European Commission services forwarded a concrete proposal to the Russian competent authorities.

Today, the Russian authorities have notified that, in their view, the Commission proposal does not fall within the framework of the Barroso-Medvedev political agreement.

Given the positive laboratory results on bean sprouts announced over the weekend, further linking the outbreak to a specific source, the Commission believes that its proposal falls well within the scope of the Barroso-Medvedev agreement.

The Commission looks forward to a re-examination of this proposal by the Russian authorities so that exports of EU products can resume as soon as possible.

Finally, I am also very sensitive to the financial impact that this crisis is having on farmers, in particular, vegetable producers.

This is why I am working closely with my colleague, Commissioner Ciolos, to address the hardship faced by producers who have also been hit by the E. coli outbreak.

The Commission is working hand-in-hand with the Member States with one common goal – to bring this outbreak to an end as soon as possible.

**End**

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