

COMMENTS OF THE COMMISSION ON A PETITION FROM IRISH CITIZENS

"WE NEED TO KNOW WHERE OUR FOOD COMES FROM".

The Commission's comments to the petition

The Commission views food labelling, including indications on origin, as primarily an instrument of consumer information. Origin labelling is not a tool for contributing to food safety since all food and feed legally placed on the market in the European Union must be safe, irrespective of where it comes from.

In accordance with the current Community legislation, origin labelling is required

- in cases where consumers might be misled on the true origin or provenance of the foodstuffs, (Directive 2000/13/EC)¹ and
- in application of specific rules such as those for fruit and vegetables, beef, wine, honey fish, and imported poultry

Moreover, additional information on the origin/provenance of a food may be provided on a voluntary basis. However, it is important that any voluntary origin indications do not lead to confusion as to the -origin or provenance of foodstuffs and do not mislead consumers.

The Commission is keen to improve the food labelling legislation with a view to better informing consumers on the characteristics and on the qualities of foods, set apart any concern regarding food safety, which is guaranteed by the entire veterinary and food law of the European Union.

On 30 January 2008 the Commission adopted a proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the provision of food information to consumers² with a view to make food labels clearer and more relevant to the needs of EU consumers. This proposal does not extend the items to which compulsory origin labelling applies, but it provides for rules in order to ensure that voluntary origin indications do not mislead the consumer.

In accordance with the proposed rules, processed food products may carry a label indicating the Member State from which they come, as long as the last substantial change/processing activity took place in that Member State. This approach is in line with the Community Customs Code. However, if the main ingredients of the food come from a different origin, that must also be included on the label. Consequently, in the case mentioned by the petitioners, a food could be called "Irish" if it was processed in Ireland but if the main components of the food came from another country their origin should also be mentioned on the label.

The draft Regulation foresees that voluntary origin indications on all meat, other than beef and veal, should provide information on the different locations of birth, rearing and slaughter of the animal in so far as that animal has not been born, reared and slaughtered in the same

¹ Directive 2000/13/EC¹ of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 March 2000 on the approximation of the laws of the Member States relating to labelling, presentation and advertising of foodstuff, OJ L 109, 6.5.2000

² COM(2008)40 final

country or place hence, a single origin declaration (Irish sheep) may be given only if the sheep was born, reared and slaughtered in Ireland, otherwise information on each of the places where those events took place should be given.

The Commission proposal is currently under discussion in the European Parliament and Council. The issue of origin has given rise to further debate. In its Green Paper on agricultural product quality, the Commission specifically asks whether an obligatory indication of place of production of primary products, such as 'EU' or 'non-EU', could be useful to ensure a better connection is made between the farming input and the final product. This Green Paper is open for responses from stakeholders and the public until 31.12.2008.