Commission adopts Staff Working Document on Better Training for Safer Food programme

The European Commission has recently adopted a Staff Working Document on the Better Training for Safer Food programme (BTSF). The Document sets out the principal challenges which BTSF is currently facing and identifies a series of possible actions to overcome them. It sets targets for the short-medium term (up to and including 2013) and long term (from 2014). The overall aim is to increase the size, quality, impact and productivity of BTSF while generating economies of scale.

An intermediate assessment of the first two years of BTSF was carried out in 2008. It aimed to assess the impact of the training on participants' work, to learn more about the implementation of training and its strengths and weaknesses and to obtain recommendations for the future. The assessment identified a number of challenges to which any long-term training strategy must respond. These were:

- providing a level of training capable of responding to a huge and increasing demand;
- clearer identification of training priorities and target audiences;
- improvements to training quality, particularly by focusing on advanced-level courses with a strong practical element;
- increased dissemination and more effective implementation of the "train-the-trainer" approach;
- establishment of standard evaluation procedures for training quality and impact;
- improving organisational and procedural aspects such as planning of training and more interpretation provision.

The Commission responded to these findings by drawing up the Staff Working Document which proposes actions to enable BTSF to successfully overcome these challenges. Some of these actions can be implemented in the short-medium term (i.e. by the end of 2013) and include:

- a study to accurately estimate the demand for BTSF training;
- a pilot project aimed at setting up an e-learning tool for basic-level training;
- increasing training output through closer cooperation of EC services with Member State and third country authorities, international organisations and the private sector;
- better identifying training priorities and target audiences by preparing a standard questionnaire to ascertain training needs and deepening cooperation with national authorities and stakeholders;
- increasing participant homogeneity through:
  - more accurate definition of training goals and target audiences;
  - development of basic- and advanced-level courses for all subjects in the long term;
  - more interpretation;
  - maintaining regional-level training, particularly in third countries;
- reinforcing the train the trainer approach in the selection process;
- a study on best practice in training for in-depth investigation of ways to improve training quality;
- improving dissemination through by providing clear learning tools and documentation, verifying possibilities offered by e-learning and setting up dissemination plans through coordination with stakeholders;
- general assessments of BTSF every two years.
Actions planned for launch in the short-medium term but which cannot be completed within that timeframe should be concluded in the long-term (i.e. 2014 onwards). Certain other actions can only be implemented in the long-term and these include:

- implementation of e-learning for basic-level training;
- introduction of basic- and advanced-level courses for all subjects;
- organisation of international expert meetings to reflect on prioritisation of needs;
- establishment of a summer school to increase availability of highly-qualified tutors;
- verification of the possibility of creating a post-graduate training centre for previous participants;
- organisation of exchange programmes of officials/trainers between national competent authorities;
- setting up an alumni network to increase knowledge sharing;
- creation of a network and database of tutors who could carry out training;
- obtaining a formal commitment from Member States for dissemination as well as development of dissemination plans by all countries and stakeholders;
- verification of instruments and sources facilitating quantification of the impact of training.

An action plan setting out actions to be put into practice by end-2013 has been drawn up. This also identifies opportunities for reflection on longer-term strategies.

A key element in the actions set out in the Document is their ability to respond to a high-level of demand. The ad-hoc nature of BTSF has been sufficient for participation levels in the pilot phase but it is now necessary to move towards more concrete structures of governance. The challenge here is to achieve a more structured set up without compromising the flexibility which has served BTSF so well thus far. All procedural steps should be reviewed bi-annually in order to strike the requisite balance between structure and flexibility.

The governance of BTSF should be defined, taking account of:

- the role of the Executive Agency for Health and Consumers' role in managing BTSF;
- development of standard operating procedures to better define priorities, including a performance-based review process;
- development of a structured approach to coordination with stakeholders.

The Staff Working Document looks at options which are not directly linked to a budget increase. Other options could imply an increase in budget above the €15 million estimated in Communication COM (2006) 519 after 2013. Any eventual increase relates to the longer term and will be subject to a prior cost-benefit analysis.

An ex-post evaluation covering the entire period of the programme will be carried out in 2011. It will form the basis of any future decision on the development of BTSF.