

MINISTERIAL CONFERENCE ON THE FOLLOW UP TO THE FIPRONIL INCIDENT

BRUSSELS

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OPENING SPEECH

Dear Ministers,

Two months ago, the Commission was informed via the EU's Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed (RASFF) of the fipronil contamination of eggs and egg products. As you know, the situation evolved rapidly and became the focus of significant consumer, political and media attention.

We together have used last weeks to collect data, to analyse the incident, but more importantly, to reflect on lessons learned and to look for a more coordinated, more coherent approach to public health, food safety and food fraud. I am delighted to welcome you, to this Ministerial conference of significant importance. The success of the initiatives put forward today depends on your input and support.

Given the extensive discussion we had in the Informal Agriculture and Fisheries Council in Tallinn, we do not need to repeat again today the sequence of events which led to this incident. It is now time to move forward and to agree on what can be done in the future to avoid or contain similar situations.

In these weeks after our meeting in Tallinn, the Commission has worked hand in hand with Member States to minimise and manage the consequences of the contamination:

- The affected farms were blocked by Member States' authorities while the criminal investigations are ongoing;
- The Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed, in combination with food traceability provisions, allowed us to quickly trace, recall and destroy relevant food products in the EU;
- Information flowed freely between Member States, the Commission and global partners to minimise the impact, including on trade;
- Frank and fruitful discussions have examined the issue from several perspectives, including in the Standing Committee on Plants, Animals, Food and Feed, the meeting of the Chief Veterinary Officers, the European Parliament's Plenary as well as the Committees on Environment, Public Health and Food Safety and Agriculture and Rural Affairs;

- We have collectively agreed on an EU-wide monitoring exercise to examine the illegal use of substances in eggs and poultry meat and the Commission is ensuring its coordination;
- The Commission is organising fact-finding missions to the most affected Member States to study the origins of and response to the contamination;
- At all times, my services have been coordinating closely with those of Commissioner Malmström - my colleague in charge of Trade - and Commissioner Hogan – in charge of Agriculture, as you well know - to ensure that our response remains coordinated and forward looking.

All of these actions have been taken with two priorities in mind:

1. Firstly, ensuring a high level of consumer protection; and
2. Secondly, guaranteeing the collective enforcement of EU rules.

I want to stress, once again, that this incident is the result of a criminal fraudulent activity. As far as we can tell from the available information, the public health risk was negligible and quickly contained. Indeed, after testing thousands of samples, only three presented levels involving a potential health risk.

Nonetheless, Ministers, I firmly believe that this is an instructive case – it demonstrates that the criminal actions of a few can threaten the integrity and reputation of our entire food chain, one of the economic pillars of the Union.

The incident has been examined at length in farms, laboratories and offices across Europe. After our meeting in Tallinn, after several bi-lateral talks and the discussion in front of the European Parliament plenary, our Chief Veterinary Officers have analysed the technical details and its possible follow-up in terms of corrective actions.

On this basis of all this work, I think we are now in a position to recommend concrete actions that accurately reflect lessons learned from this specific case. I want to thank all the delegations for their very constructive input, and particularly the comprehensive work conducted by Austria, Belgium, France, Germany and the Netherlands.

I am determined that we make the most of the political weight around the table today. For this reason I propose that we focus our discussion on the proposed conclusions which address the following aspects:

1. The fipronil contamination is not a public health concern, and yet it was perceived as such. This raises the question on how we interpret and communicate on risk between Member States, the Commission and the general public.
2. Another crucial element is the need for a better coordination between risk assessment and risk management for such incidents.
3. What happened clearly calls for increased flexibility of residue control systems to prevent and detect the use of an illegal substance.
4. More generally we need to reconcile the secrecy of judicial investigations on food fraud with the need to ensure transparency on public health issues.
5. The Commission is already exploring ways to improve the use of and interaction between the Administrative Assistance and Cooperation system and Rapid Alert System for Food & Feed. We bear a shared responsibility for these mechanisms in order to collectively improve their efficiency.

Through our proposed conclusions we have tried to provide clear answers to these issues. Following your constructive input of the last days we can today aim at finalising this document as a common set of 'lessons learned' and 'follow-up actions'.

These proposed conclusions include improving risk interpretation and communication, strengthening the flexibility and efficiency of residue monitoring, and ensuring a co-ordinated risk management approach at EU level, particularly through a better interaction between the Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed and the Administrative and Cooperation system.

A single contact point for both RASFF and AAC in each Member State will also represent a useful tool towards enhancing the efficient and rapid exchange of information.

Ministers,

Above all, this case illustrates the need for a coherent and coordinated vision, and a firm undertaking from Member States to follow it.

I am heartened, therefore, by your attendance. It represents your commitment to consumer protection and to improving the use and efficiency of the EU's systems. And I guarantee that your commitment is mirrored by my own.

Ultimately, I have no doubt that the fipronil incident will lead to the further strengthening of the EU's food safety and food fraud systems – resulting in superior levels of public health protection for European citizens.

And with that goal in mind, I'm looking forward to a productive and insightful discussion today.

Thank you.

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