

CONCLUSIONS

Joint meeting of the Farmers and Consumers and Environment categories 5 June 2013

The **Consumers and Environment** and the **Farmers** categories held a joint meeting at the EESC on Wednesday 5 June 2013 on the general subject **Restoring confidence in the food chain by making it more transparent**, structured as follows:

1. **Trade and inspection: what guarantees are there for consumers and professionals?**

- International negotiations and their impact on European production: **Arnaud Petit**, Head of Products and Markets at Copa-Cogeca
- Official inspections in Europe: **Eric Pondelet**, Director of Directorate D (SANCO)
- What lessons can be learnt from the horsemeat scandal? The view of the French meat and livestock association: **Dominique Langlois**, President of INTERBEV

2. **Crisis in the agri-food sector: the need for better information**

- European consumer confidence in food safety and in action taken by the authorities: results of the 2010 Eurobarometer: **Anne Laure Gassin**, Director of Communications at the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA)
- Traceability in the agricultural sector: the example of Belgium: **Herman Diricks**, Director-General for Inspection Policy at the Belgian Federal Agency for the Safety of the Food Chain (FASFC)
- How do we give back to consumers the information and the means to choose?: **François Collart Dutilleul**, legal expert, professor of law at the University of Nantes, member of the Institut Universitaire de France – director of the European programme LASCAUX (ERC)

The categories' spokespersons closed the meeting by summarising the main recommendations:

Labelling the national origin of ingredients

Various recent surveys carried out by European consumers' associations have shown that consumers have high expectations in relation to information on the origin of products¹.

Furthermore, in the case of the horsemeat scandal, there is a clear link between fraud and the complexity of the supply chain. It involved multiple intermediaries based in different countries, in particular traders who change the origin of raw materials very quickly according to relative prices on the markets. In this kind of chain, the origin of ingredients is seen as a variable which can be played with at any time in order to reduce costs.

Labelling of the origin of ingredients would undoubtedly lead to much more transparent, longer-lasting and probably shorter chains. It would also have the advantage of making fraud more difficult, obliging professionals to verify how their suppliers are acting and the conformity of the labelling of raw materials. By the same token, suppliers would have responsibility towards their customers. Ultimately, this labelling would make the whole chain more trustworthy and reduce the risk of fraud.

Adapting and coordinating inspection policies at European level

Guidelines are currently in place for drawing up national policies on health inspections. The legislation requires that they be based on a risk analysis carried out by the Member States.

However, the horsemeat scandal has thrown the spotlight on major shortcomings in the inspection system and it is clearly crucial to carry out an independent and in-depth audit at European level in order to identify what improvements are needed.

Furthermore, this system still focuses on health risks, which are naturally a priority, but the issue of fraud affecting the authenticity and the essential characteristics of foodstuffs is not properly taken into account. An inspection system intended to root out food fraud therefore still needs to be created. It should take account of the increasing complexity and internationalisation of chains, which requires strong coordination at European, indeed international, level.

In general terms, it should be pointed out that official inspections remain a key factor in the reliability of food chains and the reduction in resources assigned to them is clearly a great problem. Given the budgetary restrictions facing the Member States, the human and financial resources for inspections should be used more effectively and there must be European cooperation, so that official inspections remain efficient and effective.

¹

In the case of foodstuffs containing several ingredients, the information should cover the ingredients making up more than half of the recipe.

Ensuring transparency regarding the means used and the results of inspections

In some countries, it is difficult to know what means are used by public authorities and professionals for inspections in the food chain. These data are therefore crucial if consumers are to be properly informed of the trustworthiness of products and the practices of the agri-food sector. Sadly, these days public authorities are too often content to communicate in a manner which seeks to reassure but, in the absence of solid arguments, fails to convince. Clear and comparable indicators making it possible to monitor inspection pressure year by year should therefore be harmonised in order to ensure transparency for the public and restore the confidence of consumers.

Strengthening sanctions in the event of fraud, publicising sanctions

The horsemeat scandal has brought to light the very low level of sanctions applicable in cases of fraud. In some Member States, a person guilty of fraud can end up profiting even after paying the fines laid down. This situation is clearly unacceptable, both ethically and from the point of view of the effectiveness of public policy. The Commission's proposal for a regulation, which lays down that sanctions must be greater than the amount of the fraud, should therefore be supported, since it would have the deterrent effect that the current system of sanctions does not have.

As well as the size of the fine, the publicising of sanctions can also be a way to discourage fraud. Cases of food fraud often remain confidential and the public has little knowledge of them, enabling professionals involved in unfair practices to preserve their reputation amongst consumers. Through the systematic publicising of sanctions, the regulator would clearly enhance the deterrent effect of anti-fraud legislation.

Harmonising standards between foodstuffs imported from third countries and those produced in the European Union

This is a very important issue. A number of examples have been presented which demonstrate that products from third countries do not necessarily meet the same standards as European products. This leads to distortions in competition, to the detriment of European producers. It is not satisfactory either for consumers to find products on the shelves which do not conform to the same quality requirements when there is no way of distinguishing them.

Establishing an authorisation for traders

The horsemeat scandal brought to the fore meat traders who enable agri-food industry operators to find raw materials - in particular, but not only, beef bulk packs - at the most advantageous price. There is currently no requirement for this profession in terms of training or knowledge of the legislation. Yet does trading in meat not have the same implications, from the point of view of consumer health and accurate information, as trading in steel or oil? It therefore seems crucial to ensure that traders know and apply the rules on traceability, in relation both to their suppliers and to

their customers. This is why we are calling for the establishment of an authorisation for these professionals, in order to prevent the problems we have seen. The issuing and renewal of this authorisation must be based on official inspections.
