

euinsight

The EU: Keeping Food Safe from the Farm to the Fork

Designed to protect consumers while facilitating the smooth operation of the single market, the European Union's food safety policy provides a comprehensive set of common guidelines to ensure the high quality of food for human consumption and of animal feed. Legal standards cover general food and feed hygiene, animal health and welfare, plant health, and chemical or biological contaminants.

The EU food safety strategy has three core elements—legislation, scientific research and independent expert advice, and enforcement and control. General rules regarding hygiene, traceability and quality control are supplemented by special measures in areas where specific consumer protection is justified, including the authorized use of pesticides, food supplements, colorings and additives, and genetically modified organisms, among others. EU rules—which apply both to food produced inside the EU and to food imports—also regulate appropriate labeling to allow consumers to make informed decisions about the quality and provenance of their food.

The EU's food policy is based on rigorous scientific research and risk assessment, which are separated from the regulatory decision-making process. The European Food Safety Authority (EFSA), an independent agency based in Parma, Italy, provides scientific advice to inform regulatory decisions, identify emerging risks, and evaluate food safety issues.

To nip problems from potentially unsafe food in the bud, the EU operates a rapid alert system that issues warnings throughout the EU if a threat is identified. If necessary, all shipments of a particular product from the farm, factory, or port of entry will be stopped. Products already in warehouses and shops may be recalled. To facilitate such action, all EU-based operators throughout the feed and food chain have a legal obligation to retain information necessary for efficient tracking and tracing.

Transparency and Control

The European Commission—the executive arm of the European Union—ensures that EU food safety legislation is being actively implemented and enforced by all EU countries.

To ensure transparency and the consistent, effective implementation of an official control system, each EU Member State is required to develop an integrated multi-annual plan for monitoring and enforcement of feed and food law, which encompasses all regulatory agencies involved in the food or feed industry. The plans are subsequently reviewed by the European Commission and other Member States to ensure that all partners use a risk-based approach to enforce a satisfactory level of regulation and inspection. At the end of each year, an annual report must be submitted to the European Commission, updating the

initial plan and facilitating forward planning. Such transparency and peer review are key factors in the EU's single market.

The Commission's Food and Veterinary Office (FVO) ensures the enforcement of EU legislation by inspecting and verifying the effectiveness of national control systems in Member States. The FVO also audits countries wishing to export products to the EU on behalf of the 27 Member States.

All findings and conclusions of FVO inspections—in EU Member States and abroad—are made publicly available online, and generally include recommendations for dealing with any shortcomings revealed during the inspections. The relevant in-country food safety authorities then present an action plan on how they intend to address those recommendations. Together with other Commission services, including those responsible for external relations, trade, or development aid, the FVO supports and monitors the action plan through technical assistance and follow-up inspections.

Poultry and Salmonella—Preventing Contamination at the Source

EU policy is designed to identify and prevent potential health risks as early as possible in the food chain, rather than trying to eliminate contamination at later stages of production and processing. For example, the EU strategy for countering salmonella requires that poultry producers implement a rigorous testing regime at three key levels: first, among the breeding flock; second,

among the laying flock; and finally, among those poultry destined for slaughter. Any holdings which do not meet the required standards are subject to market restrictions.

Beginning in January 2009, all eggs sold for consumption in the EU must come from certified salmonella-free holdings. By 2011, all chicken for retail sale must meet the same criteria.

Chinese Milk Products

To protect European citizens from melamine-contaminated food, the EU has prohibited the import of foods originating in China which are intended for infants and children and which contain any milk.

In addition, all incoming shipments of food products from China are now subject to rigorous border controls. All products containing more than 15 percent milk, and those products where the percentage of milk contained is unclear, will be tested prior to entering the EU. Any products containing more than 2.5 parts per million (ppm) of melamine will be barred.

The Traceability System: Roles and Responsibilities

| | Overall responsibilities | Action taken when a risk is identified |
|---------------------------------|---|--|
| Food and feed businesses | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify and document product information, including where products come from and where they are going. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Immediately withdraw the affected products from the market, and/or recall them from consumers. Destroy any food or feed that does not satisfy food safety requirements. Inform the relevant authorities of the risk and the action it has taken. |
| Member State authorities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monitor production, processing and distribution of food and feed products to ensure that operators have traceability systems in place. Set and enforce penalties for operators who do not meet EU traceability requirements. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure that operators are meeting their obligations. Trace the risk forward and backward along the food chain. Notify the EU's Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed. |
| European Union | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enact sector-specific traceability legislation as appropriate. Carry out regular inspections to ensure that operators are meeting food safety standards. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Alert members of the Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed of the risk. Coordinate action by national authorities. Impose import/export restrictions, if required. |

Tracing Food in the EU: From the Farm to the Fork

In 2008, the U.S. was faced with a severe outbreak of Salmonellosis that was first attributed to raw tomatoes, but was only later identified as the result of contaminated jalapeño and Serrano peppers grown, harvested, or packed in Mexico. Such incidents illustrate the importance of being able to quickly trace a food safety risk back through the distribution chain to swiftly identify the problem and prevent the further dissemination of contaminated products.

Traceability—the ability to track and trace any food, feed, food-producing animal or substance used for consumption, through all stages of

production, processing and distribution—is a cornerstone of the EU's food safety policy. Since the internal market allows food and feed products to circulate freely between EU countries, the EU's General Food Law makes traceability compulsory for all food and feed businesses; all operators are legally obligated to implement systems to identify where their products have come from and where they are going, and must be able to rapidly provide this information to the relevant authorities.

In addition to the general requirements, sector-specific legislation applies to certain categories of food products (fruit and vegetables, beef, fish, honey, olive oil) so that consumers can identify their origin and authenticity. To facilitate disease control measures, animals must be tagged with the details of their origin and stamped with the traceability code of the slaughterhouse where they are prepared for market. Traceability and labeling rules also apply to genetically modified organisms (GMOs).

Genetic Engineering and Food Safety

The European Commission maintains an open but vigilant policy of pre-market approval of genetically modified organisms (GMOs), based on independent scientific advice from EFSA.

The EU regulates the production and sale of genetically modified food, feed and crops, ensuring that GMOs on the market are safe for consumption and for release into the environment. Before sales are authorized, GM products must undergo a rigorous scientific assessment.

Cloning and other forms of genetic engineering of animals also raise issues ranging from food safety to animal welfare to ethical, moral

and socio-economic questions. In preparation for the development of a regulatory framework, the European Commission recently solicited the opinion of the EFSA, the European Group on Ethics in Science and New Technologies, and the European public.

Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE or "Mad Cow Disease")

Stringent monitoring and control measures have been applied to eradicate BSE in the EU.

- All animals presented for slaughter must undergo a veterinary inspection, and are subject to further laboratory testing if infection is suspected.
- All cattle older than 30 months must undergo diagnostic testing.
- Specified risk materials such as the spinal cord, brain, eyes, and tonsils must be removed from cattle, sheep and goats, and must be incinerated or otherwise processed to prevent re-entry into the food chain.
- The feeding of meat-and-bone meal, including fish meal, to cattle, sheep, and goats is banned.
- Any animals that may have received the same feed as an animal infected with BSE must be culled and destroyed.

All non-EU countries exporting meat and meat products to the EU must also meet the above requirements, unless their BSE risk status has been classified as negligible.



EU Insight is published by the Delegation of the European Commission to the United States.

Anthony Smallwood
Spokesperson & Head of
Press and Public Diplomacy
Editor-in-Chief

Stacy Hope
Editor

Melinda Stevenson
Writer & Assistant Editor

ISSN: 1830-5059

Catalogue No: IQ-AB-08-10-EN-C

2300 M Street, NW
Washington, DC 20037
202.862.9500

www.eurunion.org
email: delegation-usa-info@ec.europa.eu

Issue No. 25, November 2008

For more information: www.eurunion.org/euinsight