



EUROLAB Briefing

EU debates tighter food labelling rules and more control on food products

MEPs called for more meat tests along the food chain in the wake of the horsemeat scandal during a debate in the food safety committee on Monday, 18 February 2013. Many voiced concern over member states' level of commitment to enforcing the EU's existing rules on labelling and urged the European Commission to step up controls.

Background:

Swedish frozen-food company Findus withdrew all its beef lasagna ready meals from supermarkets after tests revealed they contained up to 100% horsemeat.

The Food Standards Agency (FSA), a British government body, gave food companies a week to test all their beef products upon discovery of the mislabeled products.

The UK agency instructed consumers to return the Findus lasagnas and Tesco burgers as a precaution, but said there was no evidence to suggest that horsemeat itself was a food safety risk.

In response to the deepening and widening scandal surrounding the discovery of horse DNA in processed meat products in a number of EU member states, the Greens/EFA group is calling on the European Commission and relevant regulatory agencies to take action. The group is pushing for an emergency hearing of the European Parliament's environment committee with the relevant EU commissioners for food safety, Tonio Borg, and agriculture, Dacian Cioloș. The group has also highlighted questions to be urgently addressed by the EU's Food and Veterinary Office (FVO) and the EU's anti-fraud agency (OLAF).

Most Members felt that the issue was one of labelling and traceability rather than food safety, although some highlighted concerns that horses could be treated with substances like the painkiller drug Phenilbutazone, which is banned from meat for human consumption.

In the European Parliament, the Socialists and Democrats group (S&D) said they would continue with a "campaign for honest food labelling".

Green food safety and anti-fraud spokesperson Bart Staes (MEP, Belgium) added:

'The mandate of the EU's Food and Veterinary Office is to assure compliance with EU rules on food safety and quality through audits and inspections. The role of the FVO must now clearly be looked at. Applicable EU legislation on food safety and labelling also must be assessed and any deficiencies addressed.

In particular, there is a need to provide for mandatory country-of-origin labelling for all meat, including meat used as an ingredient in processed food. This should include place of birth, rearing and slaughter. Current EU rules only require country labelling for unprocessed beef. The Greens had called for full origin labelling on meat products in 2010 but this was refused by EU governments, who are now left with egg on their faces. The Commission is currently reviewing the applicable rules on food information and it must propose these changes.'

But the European Commission seems to believe the horsemeat scandal is a straightforward case of fraud, which can be settled in court.

"All food in the EU is traceable so you can always work back to the source of the problem," said Commission spokesperson Frédéric Vincent, suggesting no further legislation was needed and that "operators must sort this out through legal channels."

Sophie Auconie, a French MEP for the centre-right European People's Party (EPP), backed this argument, saying that Article 2 of the the 2000 directive on food labelling already deals with the issue and simply needed to be properly enforced.

"In reality the problem does not reside in a lack of rules but in the fact that they are not respected, and therefore a lack of control of the rules in certain member states," said Auconie, who drafted a June 2012 report on the electronic tagging of bovine animals for the Parliament's environment committee.

"In the face of increasingly long supply chains within the agri-food business, it is absolutely essential to increase the means of control that authorities have over the food chains," she said.

In addition, EU ministers in charge of agriculture and food safety met in Brussels on Wednesday, 13 February, to consider the wider implications of the recent discovery of horsemeat in beef products. Commissioner Borg is due appear in ENVI for an extraordinary meeting which will be held on the 28.02. to further discuss the widening horsemeat scandal across Europe. This meeting is a follow up on the exchange of views that was held in ENVI on the 18.02. with Commission and European Food Safety Authority representatives when MEPs called for more meat tests and many voiced concern over member states' level of commitment to enforcing the EU's existing rules on labelling and urged the European Commission to step up controls.

Currently, in the EU, the product origin must always be labelled for olive oil, fish (unless it is canned or prepared), beef, fresh or frozen poultry of non-EU origin, wine, most fresh fruit and vegetables, honey and eggs. For all other foods, origin labelling is optional.

The new EU food labelling legislation which will apply from December 2014 aims at increasing transparency about the origin of food sold on the EU market.

The European Consumers' Organisation, BEUC, recommends that origin labelling should become mandatory for all meats, milk, unprocessed foods, single-ingredient foods such as flour and sugar and ingredients that represent more than 50% of a food.

For more information please contact: info@eurolab.org