



EUROLAB Special Briefing

Food fraud in Europe. An overview of European Commission's policy initiatives for a safer food chain.

The European patterns of food consumption are vastly different today than they were half a century ago. Nowadays, EU citizens are used to a vast choice, convenience, product quality, and competitive prices when it comes to the food they buy. There is an increasing awareness and interest of consumers in the safety risks related to the food chain. Therefore, the main expectation of European consumers today is that the proper and sustainable measures are put in place in order to ensure that the food sold on the EU market is safe to eat.

Following these trends, the EU food safety policy has evolved and adapted in line with these changes. After the horse meat scandal in February 2013, the EU Food Safety became an important issue to be dealt with in Europe. Different initiatives, including a [5-point Action Plan](#) have been undertaken to address issues exposed by the horsemeat scandal specifically and to enhance the EU control system as a whole for detecting and countering violations of the rules which are motivated by the prospect of a financial or economic benefit for the perpetrators.

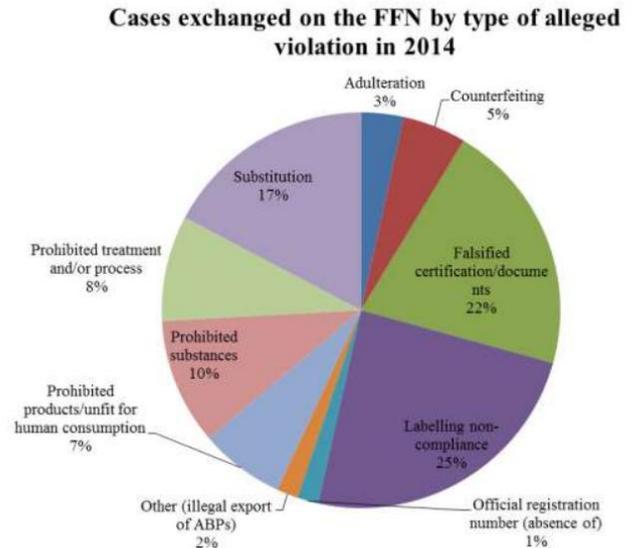
Actions taken include:

- the creation of an **EU Food Fraud Network (FFN)** comprising of representatives from the Commission and Member States (plus Iceland, Norway and Switzerland). In accordance with Articles 34 to 40 of Regulation (EC) No 882/2004 EU Member States must cooperate with one another to ensure enforcement of food law across borders. The horsemeat scandal showed that one of the weaknesses of the current system of enforcement along the food chain was the difficulty for Member States' competent authorities to communicate efficiently with their counterparts in other Member States for the purposes of ensuring enforcement in cases of violations having cross-border impact. The Commission decided therefore to activate a dedicated network of administrative assistance liaison bodies, the "Food Fraud Contact Points" (FFCP), that would handle specific requests for cross-border cooperation in cases of "food fraud", acting under the legal framework provided in Title IV of Regulation (EC) No 882/2004. By engaging in their Administrative Assistance and Cooperation duties, the FFCP and the FFN help to improve the capability of competent authorities to:
 - detect and prevent violations of food chain rules, also across borders and in potential cases of "food fraud";
 - collect the information which is needed (in accordance with applicable national rules) to further refer a case to investigation/ prosecution.
- the development (on-going work) of a dedicated IT tool, similar to the RASFF (Rapid Alert System for Feed and Food), which enables the members of the network to rapidly exchange information and data on potential cases of cross-border fraud;
- specialised training offered from 2014 to food inspectors, police and customs officers and judicial authorities concerning new investigation/control techniques related to food fraud and more effective cross-agencies cooperation at national level;

- special attention being given at EU level to the need to develop enhanced laboratory analysis capabilities, through the pooling of knowledge and resources available in the Member States and the development of specialized research programmes;
- a legislative proposal to review the legal framework applicable to official controls along the agri-food chain, and a study planned in 2014 on the legal framework that currently governs the fight against fraudulent and deceptive practices;
- a better coordination at EU level of all services dealing with matters relating to food fraud, and the establishment of a dedicated team within the Commission (Directorate-General for Health and Consumers).

According to the Food Fraud Network Activity Report 2014, interaction on 60 cases took place through the Network. Alleged violations were mostly related to labelling non-compliances (for instance with regard to durability dates, addition of water or ingredients), falsified certification and/or documents and substitution, such as replacement of a higher value species with a lower value species.

Meat products are the category of foodstuffs for which the majority of exchanges took place through the Network in 2014, followed by fish products and honey. Importantly, however, statistical conclusions related to potential “food fraud” cases in Europe cannot yet be drawn from these data given that Member States may also exchange information outside of the Food Fraud Network and that cases which do not have a cross - border dimension, i.e. which occur at purely national level, are not exchanged via the Network.



As an overall conclusion, following the recent scandals in the food sector, some lessons-learned and necessary future improvements have been detected:

- Large scale, cross-border fraudulent schemes that take advantage of the weaknesses of an increasingly globalised food supply can impact hugely on consumers and operators, on thus on the economy.
- Constant vigilance from operators and competent authorities from the Member States towards economically motivated fraud that can be perpetrated at any step of the food supply chain is therefore needed.
- There is the need to improve cross-border cooperation among national enforcement authorities, essential to effectively tackle fraudulent activities, and the need to mobilise in anti-food fraud activities not only food inspection services but also other law enforcement agencies (e.g. police, customs) and judicial authorities.
- Need to strengthen the capability of the control system as a whole to assess at an early stage the potential vulnerability to fraud of the different parts of the food supply chain (based on the characteristic of the foods, the production processes, the modalities of the various steps along the food supply chain, prices, and their variations over time), and the capability of national enforcers to detect – and prevent - potential frauds. It is very importance to make sure the availability of sound methods for the detection of adulterations and the capability to anticipate as far as possible the "opportunities" for fraud along the chain (e.g. the availability and access to adulterants that can be readily disguised and undetected by currently accepted testing methods).

Sources:

- http://ec.europa.eu/food/safety/official_controls/food_fraud/docs/memo-14-113_five-point-action-plan_en.pdf
- http://ec.europa.eu/food/safety/official_controls/food_fraud/index_en.htm
- http://ec.europa.eu/food/safety/official_controls/food_fraud/docs/food_safety_controls_fraud_network-activity-report_2014.pdf
- <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2004:165:0001:0141:EN:PDF>

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