

Food safety controls in the European Union

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Over the last few decades a succession of high profile food scares has shaken consumer confidence in the safety of food products. In the EU these food scares were the major driving force in the establishment of food safety legislation and infrastructure in order to restore confidence in the food supply chain, 'from farm to fork'.

Food safety controls, systems and legislation have been put in place across the European Union (EU) which aim to control both microbiological and chemical hazards in the supply chain and, thereby, minimise the risk to consumers' health.¹ The EU has established a comprehensive food safety strategy which ensures that the traceability of food must be established at all stages of production, processing and distribution. This requirement relies on a 'one-step back and one-step forward' approach which implies that food business operators have in place a system enabling them to identify their immediate supplier(s) and their immediate customer(s). The high standards apply to food produced inside the EU and to food imports.¹ The EU food strategy has three core elements; (i) food safety legislation, (ii) sound scientific advice on which to base decisions, and (iii) enforcement and control.

Sound scientific advice on which to base decisions

Scientific advice from the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) underpins all EU food and feed policy and legislation.² EFSA provides advice when legislation is being drafted and when policymakers are dealing with a food safety scare. In deciding what action to take, the European Commission applies the precautionary principle, i.e. it will act without waiting for scientific certainty if the scientists say there is a potential danger.¹

Food safety legislation

Food safety legislation in the EU is comprehensive and covers food, animal feed, and extends to food hygiene, and it applies the same high standards across all EU countries.² The general rules for all food and feed are supplemented by special measures in areas where specific consumer protection is necessary, such as the use of pesticides, food supplements, colourings, antibiotics or hormones. There are specific standards that apply to adding vitamins, minerals and similar substances to foods. The legislation also extends to products in contact with foodstuffs, such as plastic packaging.²

In 2006, an important development in food safety legislation was the introduction of the 'Hygiene Package.' This term refers to a group of EU regulations that represent a reorganisation of the regulatory framework for food hygiene and safety. These regulations clearly place the responsibility for food safety and hygiene across the entire food chain on the food business operator, whatever position they occupy in the food production chain. Policing of these obligations is carried out by a number of government agencies (usually Food and Veterinary Offices) involved in various regulation and enforcement activities. The

Hygiene Package builds on general food law established by EC Regulation 178 of 2002.³ This regulation also provided the legal basis for the Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed (RASFF). This system has been operating within the European Community since 1979, but it was the publication of the General Food Law (Regulation No 178/2002) which gave the RASFF legal status.² The RASFF is primarily a tool for exchange of information between the central competent authorities for the regulation of food and feed in the member states in cases where a risk to human health has been identified and measures are needed, such as withholding, recall, seizure or rejection of the products concerned.⁴

When it comes to food contaminants, EU legislation stipulates that food containing an unacceptable level of any contaminant cannot be put on the market. There are also maximum levels set for some contaminants of greatest concern to EU consumers, either due to their toxicity or their potential prevalence in the food chain. These include aflatoxins, heavy metals (such as lead and mercury), dioxins and nitrates.²

Enforcement and control

The EU Commission enforces feed and food law by checking that legislation has been properly incorporated into national law and implemented by all EU countries, and through on-the-spot inspections in the EU and outside.¹ This work is carried out by the Food & Veterinary Office (FVO) based at Grange in Ireland. The FVO may check individual food production plants, but its main task is to check that both EU governments and those of other countries have the necessary procedures in place for checking that their own food producers are sticking to the EU's high food safety standards. The FVO also plays a key role in the development of EU policy in the food safety, veterinary and plant health sectors.¹

References

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