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Food safety and third countries

*Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

Informal Agriculture Council

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It is a great pleasure for me to be here with you today.

I am sure I speak for everyone in thanking Giovanni for organising such an excellent event in such pleasant surroundings.

Before touching on food safety and third countries, let me first recap on what we have had to do in the European Union over the past couple of years.

You will all recall the difficult days of the late 1990s – when the image of the food industry was at perhaps its lowest ebb, following a succession of food crises.

When I took office in 1999, the time was ripe to crystallise a new vision – aimed firmly and squarely at putting the consumer first and regaining consumer confidence to the benefit of all.

That vision was set out in the White Paper on food safety of January 2000.

Nearly four years later, we are well on course towards completing this ambitious task, and I gratefully acknowledge the essential contribution this Council has made in this regard.

- The general food Regulation has been in force now for coming up to two years.
- The European Food Safety Authority is now up and running.
- Measures on GMOs, TSEs and zoonoses, animal by-products, labelling of food and feed, undesirable substances in feed, pesticides, additives and the withdrawal of antibiotics have all been introduced.
- The ambitious food hygiene package is coming to fruition.
- The feed hygiene proposal is passing through the legislative process.
- And our proposal on official controls is also making progress.

All these actions contribute to our overall aim to ensure that Europe's food supply is the safest in the world. Our citizens demand nothing less.

And we seek simply to ensure that the same standards of food safety apply to all products regardless of origin.

The rich diversity of European food culture is truly international. We do not have an insular approach towards food imports.

But in our drive for ever-higher standards we have to recognise that some third countries can experience difficulties in reaching the high levels we demand.

It is true that on several occasions we have banned imported food products from less developed countries, whilst recognising the economic difficulties such action would cause.

But as you know, our approach has to be based on health considerations. We simply cannot and will not compromise on food safety.

We need therefore to help third countries comply with our standards. That is why we have included in the proposal on official controls the provision of assistance to developing countries.

We have also provided training to third country authorities on, for example, TSEs, animal by-products and residues. We plan to go further in that direction by helping train our partners on control activities.

Of course, the strict standards we impose on ourselves and on our providers must also apply to exports. Food and feed that do not reach European standards should not be exported to any third country.

This concept of equality leads me to the question of **multilateralism**. The main objective in this context is to develop common standards, common approaches and non-discriminatory systems for simplified trade. We have already seen the benefits of common standards in our own internal market.

I am pleased to say that the Community is now very close to becoming a full member of the Codex Alimentarius after long and difficult negotiations.

We are also very active in the other relevant international organisations, such as the OIE and the IPPC.

In the future we will need to intensify our co-operation and work, with and within these organisations. This should enhance the development of sound international standards, reflecting scientific advice, which can serve as a basis for our own standards. It will also further our relations with third countries.

I am often confronted by suggestions that we are not doing enough to protect the health of European consumers from imports from third countries.

I reject any such suggestion out of hand.

We have a significant and sophisticated system of controls in place already and this is functioning well. With the early adoption by the Council and Parliament of my new proposal on Official Food and Feed Controls, the European Union will have a state-of-the-art system in place.

This new system will not only improve public health protection, it will also structure our relations with third countries.

I can say with confidence that our relationship with third countries has improved considerably over the past few years. I have visited key trading partners and I have regular dialogue with them.

Let me finish with a final thought. Achieving high standards of food safety is a critical component of food security. Nearly 2 million children die annually because of contaminated food and water in developing countries.

The issues of food safety, food security, and trade in agriculture are not just important technical matters – they are also at the roots of conflicts involving science, the future of agriculture and food cultures, solutions to the hunger problems and trade, market shares and competition.

In the light of the disappointing outcome at Cancun, we must not lose sight of the urgent need for global improvements.

Europe is the world's biggest importer and exporter of foodstuffs. While we have made, and continue to make, significant improvements to our own food safety system, we must not overlook the effect this may have on our trading partners.

We will not compromise on the safety of food, but we can help third countries, and especially developing countries, to understand and meet these requirements.

Thank you.