

# focus

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## Finding out about... food safety

The main aim of the Report 'Foodstuffs: Nutrition or health claims used in labelling' (A6-0122/2006) is to harmonise Member States' national rules on nutrition and health claims via an EU Regulation. MEPs called for clear definitions where foods are claimed to be 'low energy', 'low fat', 'high fibre', or to reduce cholesterol.

The other Report ('Addition of vitamins and minerals and of certain other substances to foods' - A6-0078/2006) seeks to tackle the trade and consumer problems caused by Member States' different attitudes to adding vitamins and minerals to foodstuffs, under which some countries ban additions but others allow them. EU-wide legislation would remove such barriers to trade and promote the development of the Single Market. It is not only a trade issue, of course, as vitamins and minerals taken in excessive amounts can damage health; so this is also a matter of food safety.

Following agreements with the Council, both Regulations are likely to enter into force shortly.

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In May, the European Parliament adopted two Reports on food safety issues. They approved tougher rules for foods claiming to provide nutritional and health benefits, and called for the harmonisation of national legislation on vitamin and mineral additions to foods.



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## Why food safety?

Why is the EU involved in food safety? As is shown by the need to introduce these two new Regulations concerning foodstuffs, different rules across the EU prevent the Single Market from working properly. From that perspective, food safety is simply another area where harmonisation needs to be achieved in order for the Single Market to work effectively.

But there is another reason for the Union's interest. May also saw the lifting of the 10-year EU ban on exports of British beef, which was put in place following the BSE crisis in the mid-90s.

BSE was the most significant of a number of food safety scares, which also included foot-and-mouth disease and dioxin-contaminated animal feed. There was more too: backing the proposal to create a European Food Safety Agency in 2001, UK MEP John Bowis said "It is clear that our public has lost confidence in existing procedures after a long chain of scandals and scares from olive oil, wine, eggs, beef and milk to listeria, salmonella, e-coli, GMO's and hormones in meat."

As with environmental pollution, contaminated food has no respect for national boundaries. As trade inside and outside the Union grows, a problem in one country might well be transferred to others. In the Commission's words: "Europe's consumers want food that is safe and wholesome. The concern of the European Union is to make sure that the food we eat is of the same high standard for all its citizens, whether the food is home-grown or comes from another country, inside or outside the EU."

**Europe's consumers want food that is safe and wholesome**



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## White Paper

The Union's current approach is based on the January 2000 'White Paper on Food Safety' (COM (1999) 719) which, in response to the crises of the 1990s, launched a new, proactive food policy, based around a number of strategic priorities:

- ▶ **European Food Safety Authority:** intended to ensure independent scientific advice on food safety matters.
- ▶ **legislation:** the White Paper included an Action Plan of more than 80 measures, including legislative initiatives covering animal feed, animal health and welfare, hygiene, contaminants and residues, novel food, additives, flavourings, packaging and food irradiation. The aim was to create a coherent 'farm-to-table' legislative framework.
- ▶ **control:** establishing the principle that it is feed and food operators who are primarily responsible for food safety, and that national authorities must establish systems for monitoring and controlling them. This EU-wide control system requires cooperation between the Commission and the Member States

- ▶ **consumer information:** to provide consumers with relevant information, to help allay their concerns over food safety
- ▶ **international trade:** the Union does not operate in isolation; legislation impacting on external trade must be presented and explained to the bloc's trading partners.



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The biggest innovation of the *White Paper* was said to be that of “making a single, transparent hygiene policy applicable to all food and all food operators right through the food chain ‘from the farm to the table’, [and introducing ...] effective instruments to manage food safety and any future food crises throughout the food chain.”

The European Commission also took the opportunity to place responsibility for food safety in its Directorate General for Health and Consumer Protection - the message being that consumer interests should not be secondary to those of business or agriculture.

## Information sources

‘From the farm to the fork’ ([www.ec.europa.eu/comm/food/index\\_en.htm](http://www.ec.europa.eu/comm/food/index_en.htm)) is the European Commission’s website dedicated to food safety issues. In addition to a selection of ‘Special Topics’ [e.g. ‘Avian Influenza’, ‘Labelling’, ‘GM Food & Feed’, ‘Animal Transport’] there are sections on ‘Food and Feed Safety’, ‘Animal Health and Welfare’, ‘Plant Health’, and ‘FVO Inspections’ (the FVO is the Union’s Food and Veterinary Office).

An ‘International Affairs’ section covers issues such as ‘Import Conditions’, ‘Pets and Animal Welfare’, and ‘Enlargement’. Relevant speeches, press releases and publications are brought together under the heading ‘Resources’.

As already indicated, within the Commission, food safety is primarily the responsibility of the Health and Consumer Protection DG. Information about the DG and its work can be found at [www.ec.europa.eu/comm/dgs/health\\_consumer](http://www.ec.europa.eu/comm/dgs/health_consumer).

Links to other DGs and their thematic websites (including Agriculture and Internal Market, both of which provide some material relevant to food safety issues) can be found via the Commission’s main web page: [www.ec.europa.eu](http://www.ec.europa.eu).

SCADPlus ([www.europa.eu/scadplus](http://www.europa.eu/scadplus)) has a section on food safety, which - in a chapter entitled ‘Food safety: general provisions’ - covers:

- ‘General principles and requirements of food law’
- ‘The precautionary principle’
- ‘Support for rural development’
- ‘Organically grown agricultural products and foodstuffs’
- ‘Protected geographical indications and designations of origin’
- ‘Eco-label’

There are also SCADPlus chapters on ‘Product labelling and packaging’, ‘Veterinary checks, animal health rules, hygiene of food’, ‘Animal nutrition’, ‘Animal welfare’, ‘Animal health’, ‘Plant health checks’, ‘Contamination and environmental factors’, ‘International dimension and enlargement’, and ‘Specific themes’ (GMOs, BSE, foot and mouth disease).

There is a booklet in the ‘Europe on the move’ series called *From farm to fork: Safe food for Europe’s con-*

*sumers*. Although dated 2004, it provides useful background to the Union’s interest in food safety (access via [www.europa.eu/pol/food/index\\_en.htm](http://www.europa.eu/pol/food/index_en.htm) or [www.ec.europa.eu/comm/publications/booklets/index\\_en.htm](http://www.ec.europa.eu/comm/publications/booklets/index_en.htm)).

It is the Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs configuration of the Council that deals with food safety issues. Press releases from that and other Council configurations can be found on the Council’s website at [www.consilium.europa.eu](http://www.consilium.europa.eu) (bear in mind that it is not always the ‘obvious’ Council that deals with a particular issue; some items will be discussed at the first available Council meeting).

The relevant European Parliament Committee is ‘Environment, Public Health and Food Safety’ (ENVI; details on Europarl - [www.europarl.eu](http://www.europarl.eu) - via ‘Activities’ - ‘Parliamentary business’ - ‘Committees’ or more directly via [www.europarl.europa.eu/activities/expert/committees.do](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/activities/expert/committees.do)).

Amongst other issues, ENVI is responsible for the labelling and safety of foodstuffs; veterinary legislation concerning protection against risks to human health; public health checks on foodstuffs and food production systems; and the European Food Safety Authority and the European Food and Veterinary Office.

The Committee’s web pages provide access to their Reports and to dates of meetings. Following the ‘Go to website’ link displays an additional page for ENVI, with additional materials, including speeches made at meetings of the Committee. There is also - at the foot of the page - a link to the Health and Consumer Intergroup: “a forum where MEPs will have the opportunity to regularly meet with consumer and public health experts from across the EU” (see <http://intergroup.eph.org>).

The European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) “provides objective scientific advice on all matters with a direct or indirect impact on food and feed safety.” The EFSA website ([www.efsa.eu.int](http://www.efsa.eu.int) - yes, really!) is the place to find opinions, statements and other documents from the Authority’s Scientific Committee and Scientific Panels (each of eight Panels specialises in a particular area, such as food additives, plant protection products, genetically modified organisms, biological hazards).