

COM-5/024

Brussels, 10 May 2000

DRAFT OPINION

of the Committee of the Regions

of 12 April 2000

on the

Communication from the Commission entitled "White Paper on Food Safety"

COM(1999) 719 final

The Committee of the Regions,

HAVING REGARD TO the Commission's White Paper on Food Safety (COM(1999) 719 final);

HAVING REGARD TO the decision taken by the Commission on 28 January 2000, under the first paragraph of Article 265 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, to consult it on the matter;

HAVING REGARD TO the decision taken by its president on 4 April 2000 to direct Commission 5 for Social Policy, Public Health, Consumer Protection, Research and Tourism to draw up the relevant opinion;

HAVING REGARD TO the decision taken by its president on 5 April 2000 to appoint **Ms Bunyan** (UK/PES) and **Mr Gonzi** (I/EPP) as rapporteurs-general, under rule 40(2) of its rules of procedure;

HAVING REGARD TO the general exploratory debate on the subject of the opinion, held by Commission 5 for Social Policy, Public Health, Consumer Protection, Research and Tourism and Commission 2 for Agriculture, Rural Development and Fisheries, under rule 40(3);

CONSIDERING the concern of COR members for a European food policy that guarantees a high level of consumer health protection;

CONSIDERING the reference to food safety in the Commission's communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on strategic objectives 2000-2005: Shaping the new Europe (COM (2000) 154 final);

adopted the following opinion at its 33rd plenary session held on 12 and 13 April 2000 (meeting of 12 April 2000).

The Committee of the Regions,

1. Welcomes the Commission's determination to develop and implement an EU food policy that ensures the highest standards of food safety.
2. Shares the Commission's recognition that recent emergencies in aspects of food and feedingstuffs have eroded public confidence in the safety of food and the effectiveness of the existing food safety control measures within the EU, whilst at the same time causing farmers significant loss, due to the reduction in demand for products considered to present a risk to health.
3. Believes that an important step in restoring confidence is the placing of the interests of the consumer clearly above all other interests in regard to issues of safety, as evidenced by the decision of the Commission to transfer responsibility for all food safety matters to the Commissioner for Health and Consumer Protection.
4. Agrees that the fundamental principles of food safety and public confidence must be based upon a comprehensive and integrated approach, encompassing the whole food chain "from farm to table":
 - transparency of all actions and opinions;
 - maximum information in clear and understandable form being provided to allow effective consumer choice;
 - effective traceability of all food, ingredients and feedingstuffs through the foodchain to the consumer, ensuring at every stage of the process the ability to identify all ingredients;
 - application of the precautionary principle in appropriate circumstances.
5. Would wish to state its belief that the proper application of Risk Analysis must be seen as the foundation of future EU food safety policy.
6. Recognises the need to acknowledge and respect the diversity and cultural and economic significance of regional and local traditions and customs with respect to food production and taste, and therefore of always seeking the appropriate balance between consumer safety and consumer choice.
7. Believes that the promotion and support of typical food products from different local traditions represents a very decisive way to give consumers healthy foods, and at the same time to help the economies of many rural areas.
8. Endorses the view that there is a need for consistent and effective enforcement of food safety control measures, which must be achieved by ensuring the highest standards of enforcement across the EU.
9. Argues that better compliance with safety standards can be achieved by promoting and assisting with the adoption of effective quality assurance systems by food producers.
10. Acknowledges the necessity to understand the particular requirements of small and medium sized businesses, but this understanding should not be allowed to compromise consumer safety.

11. Considers that agricultural legislation should be further updated in order to guarantee food safety and enable businesses to receive technical assistance and guidance.
12. Would urge the Commission to recognise the essential role played by local and regional authorities in the assessment of food safety risks within their area, in taking action to minimise risk and in the effective communication of information and advice to local consumers, food producers and distributors.
13. Wishes to point out that dietary, nutritional and health risks attached to food affect the socially excluded and vulnerable consumers in significantly greater proportion, and that therefore special consideration should be given to their particular needs when developing and implementing food policy.
14. Considers that whilst there is unquestionably a need to improve food labelling in order to allow consumers to make informed choices about what they decide to eat, it is essential that the information provided with food is easily understandable and therefore helpful to consumers in making such decisions.
15. Emphasises that the application of the principle of traceability of food, ingredients and feedstuffs throughout the food chain is vital in order to ensure that consumers can rely on the claims made about foods.
16. Commends the proposals to develop a European Food Authority in that its creation would demonstrate the commitment of the EU and Member States to raising the importance of food safety to the highest level and believes that the proposals create a context and momentum for radical review and modernisation of European food safety controls and coordination.
17. Would encourage the Commission, in the interests of creating a culture of transparency, to consider how the voice of European consumers from all Member States should be represented in the structure of the European Food Authority, and how to take into account the voices of European farmers, food producers and distributors.
18. Would urge the Commission to ensure that sufficient resources are provided in order that the European Food Authority can become a centre of scientific excellence and effectively carry out the significant tasks that are proposed for it.
19. Recognises the need for clarification of the relationship between any European Food Authority and Member States' own national food authorities that have been or are in the process of being created, so that the work of the European Food Authority will complement and not duplicate the activities of these bodies; in particular a clear hierarchy of duties should be created in order that food authorities in the Member States are certain as to their responsibilities; consumers will also then have more confidence in the advice they are given and the effective functioning of these authorities.
20. Agrees that real added value from a European Food Authority will be realised from its role in coordinating the gathering, analysis and dissemination of information of the highest quality, particularly in response to emergency situations.
21. Is of the opinion that there is a need to organise throughout all Member States an adequate sampling and analysis programme for human and animal foods; this is important in order to guarantee the safety of food and also to help protect European producers from any unfair competition; and in the case of a negative result, immediate action should be taken, including the provision of information to all public authorities, together with the possibility of blocking any importation which should be attempted from outside the EU.

22. Agrees that an effective EU food safety policy must apply to all food consumed within the EU, not simply that produced within the EU, and therefore equivalent comprehensive and effective controls must be applied to all food and feedingstuffs entering the EU.

Brussels, 12 April 2000.

The President

of the

Committee of the Regions

Jos Chabert

The Acting Secretary-General

of the

Committee of the Regions

Vincenzo Falcone

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