

Brussels, 26 November 2001

OPINION

of the

Committee of the Regions

of 15 November 2001

on

Food safety: the BSE crisis - consequences for consumers and primary producers

The Committee of the Regions

HAVING REGARD TO

- the decision taken by Commission 5 for Social Policy, Public Health, Consumer Protection, Research and Tourism on 5 February 2001 to ask the Bureau for authorisation to draw up an own-initiative opinion on food safety, to be backed up by a supplementary own-initiative opinion drawn up by Commission 2;
- the decision taken by its Bureau on 13 February 2001, in accordance with Article 265(5) of the Treaty establishing the European Community, to instruct Commission 2 for Agricultural, Rural Development and Fisheries and Commission 5 for Social Policy, Public Health, Consumer Protection, Research and Tourism to draw up an own-initiative opinion on this matter;
- the measures taken up to now by the European Commission to tackle the BSE crisis and other epizootic diseases;
- the Commission's White Paper on Food Safety (COM(1999) 719 final), the CoR's opinion on the matter (CdR 77/2000 fin)¹ and the work carried out up to now by the European Commission in the field of consumer protection;
- the Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council laying down the general principles and requirements of food law, establishing the European Food Authority and laying down procedures in matters of food safety (COM(2000) 716 final) and the opinion of Commission 5 on this matter (CdR 64/2001 fin);
- the Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Council

Directives 90/425/EEC and 92/118/EEC as regards health requirements for animal by-products (COM(2000) 573 final);

- the decisive results of the meeting on 7 March 2001 of the working party referred to below, in which representatives of the European Commission and relevant organisations participated;

- Commission 2's contribution to the work on food safety (CdR 56/2001) which was discussed at its meeting on 20 April 2001 (rapporteur: **Mr Sodano** (I/PES), Councillor, Province of Naples);

- the draft opinion (CdR 61/2001 rev. 2) adopted by Commission 5 on 16 July 2001 (rapporteur: **Mr Pumberger**, (A/EPP), Mayor of Eberschwang, President of the Federation of Local Authorities of Upper Austria);

WHEREAS for the purpose of coordinating the work, a joint Commission 2 and Commission 5 working party was set up, comprising two rapporteurs and 15 members drawn from both commissions and reflecting the need for geographical and political balance;

adopted the following opinion, by a unanimous vote, at its 41st plenary session, held on 14 and 15 November 2001 (meeting of 15 November):

VIEWS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Committee of the Regions

1. takes the view that the BSE problem has twofold implications, concerning action to protect public health on the one hand, and changes in the agri-food structure of the Union on the other;

2. would first of all point out that there are basically five factors which play the most important role in ensuring constructive and forward-looking cooperation in the field of food safety in Europe; these factors are as follows: responsibility; effective crisis management; quality assurance and checks; research; and specific concrete measures to restore consumer confidence;

3. believes that the consequences of the most recent crises over epizootic diseases and the scandals which have occurred in the food sector extend beyond the loss of consumer confidence and serious market disruptions as these crises have created the impression amongst the general public that it is not just consumer protection machinery that is in need of fundamental improvement and reform but also the Common Agricultural Policy itself, the quality of products and the distribution of funding;

4. proposes that steps be taken to ensure that the economic burden caused by a misguided trend in the agri-food system, as hitherto conceived, does not fall solely on one party but is distributed and borne by the whole community, bearing in mind that a wide range of players are involved, from the producer via the middleman to the consumer;

5. considers that it is right to interpret the BSE crisis as the possible tip of a wider problem (dioxin, hormones, GMO and so on) that is jeopardising food safety and therefore requires

firm and decisive action by the Commission; and takes the view that the Member States, local and regional authorities and socio-economic organisations must help in the framing of a Community policy to safeguard public health;

6. particularly highlights the need for clearly-defined responsibilities at the respective levels and clarification of who is responsible for food safety at EU, national and regional level; and stresses that the only lasting and sustainable solution offering a rational and coherent policy in this field is an all-embracing approach which encompasses all elements and policy areas involved in the food production chain and that only in this way can the legitimate demands of European consumers as regards food safety be met;
7. also supports the European Commission's endeavours to formulate a comprehensive, uniform blueprint for regulating the food production chain with a view to ensuring a high level of protection (general principles, procedures, early warning system in respect of both food and animal feed, food safety procedures, standard definitions, principles and joint measures, establishment of a European Food Authority); however, this blueprint should not be formulated so as to impede the pursuit of a market-oriented approach and liberalisation in the food sector;
8. calls upon the European Commission to act rigorously and introduce high (the most stringent) standards for a single European market in agricultural inputs (covering, for example, plant protection products and the authorisation of veterinary medicinal products) in order to avoid distortions of competition in this sector in the future and to restore cross-border consumer confidence in agricultural products;
9. demands that the Member States strictly observe existing animal health and hygiene provisions in respect of animal products and by-products (this applies to the production, marketing and importing into the EU of products of animal origin and also the disposal and treatment of animal waste) and that they carry out their supervisory obligations thoroughly in connection with the official inspection of food, animal feed and plant protection products; and calls upon the European Commission to urge the Member States to comply with these requirements;
10. proposes that support for the current research initiatives be further stepped up in order to enable scientifically-backed measures to be taken to tackle the current problems on a long term basis, too, thereby making it possible for the current crisis management approach to give way to a preventive, precautionary approach; in this context there is a need to promote training measures for the players working throughout the food chain and to ensure the necessary technical back-up; research activities should also be continued at EU level under the fifth and sixth RTD Framework Programmes;
11. calls for the dialogue between farmers and consumers to be relaunched; and takes the view that, for example, local/regional methods of agricultural production and marketing are highly suited to restoring and safeguarding consumer confidence, since in such cases in particular consumers can readily - and, generally, very clearly - picture where the animals come from, whether they have been properly reared, what they have been fed, and what other production factors are involved;
12. considers that in the medium to long term, the aim should be to put into effect a European agri-food system that rejects any form of risk to consumers justified solely under the generic principle of globalisation, particularly when strong social interests are at stake, such as health, environmental protection, and social and territorial cohesion;
13. draws attention to the vital need for a European agricultural model which not only promotes

the use of the whole of the rural environment and the multifunctionality of agriculture but, above all, is based on the principle of quality production, which is of fundamental importance to consumer safety; and attaches equal importance to the introduction of a rigorous system for facilitating the traceability of food and the provision of full information for consumers;

14. strongly urges all political bodies and all the players concerned to speed up progress towards the achievement in all areas of an agricultural sector which is economically, ecologically and socially sustainable and in tune with the environment, and also, inter alia, to promote organic cultivation methods and gear production methods to the interests of consumers, with due regard to environmental protection and the competitiveness of rural areas and the need to give top priority to food safety and quality and diversity in food production;
15. intends to play an active part in the framing of the measures to be adopted in the wake of the White Paper on food safety, as well as providing a local viewpoint on the major challenge of establishing a European food and agriculture model; and thinks that this can be done by deploying all available instruments for adjusting any CAP measures which run counter to an environmentally sustainable form of economic development that safeguards public health;
16. proposes, in the field of livestock farming, that measures be adopted to support the non-intensive rearing of indigenous breeds of cattle, as a way of promoting biodiversity, and that a generalised restructuring of animal husbandry policy under Agenda 2000 be carried out, with a gradual switch to forms of livestock farming which are in tune with animal-welfare requirements and, in particular, a gradual switch to organic production;
17. takes the view that the ban on meat-and-bone meal will lead to an increase in imports of plant-based proteins, a sector in which the EU is at present highly dependent on imports from outside the Community; dependence on these imports must be reduced by renegotiating the WTO agreements and by pursuing a policy under the CAP of encouraging EU production of non-GM oil crops rich in protein; inclusion of these crops as part of arable crop rotation would also help promote environmental conservation;
18. also points out that consumer confidence in food safety is dependent upon the provision of transparent, readily comprehensible, objective information and a proper description of the associated risks; and therefore calls for broadly-based education and information campaigns to be stepped up in the EU;
19. supports, at all events, the continued implementation of information campaigns by the European Commission or organisations in the Member States in order to inform consumers about: basic aspects of food safety (the variety of eating habits in Europe, the labelling of food, the indication of additives, the traceability of food, food hygiene and GMOs), animal welfare and the prevention and combating of epizootic diseases; the importance of consumer associations; and the role to be played by the public itself.

Brussels, 15 November 2001.

The President

The Secretary-General

of the

of the

Committee of the Regions

Committee of the Regions

Jos Chabert

Vincenzo Falcone

¹ OJ C 226 of 8.8.2000, p. 7

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CdR 61/2001 fin EN-DE-IT-FR/Ho/ht

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