

Food safety: EU must build on its strengths

Written by Adina Vălean on 10 October 2017 in Opinion
Opinion

Improving food safety has been a continuous process for the EU, and it must build on its strengths in this area, says Adina Vălean.



The EU's food policy is built around the promotion of high food safety standards which protect and promote consumers' health. These standards are widely recognised as being among the highest in the world.

Additionally, because of these high standards EU food products - such as baby milk in China - are perceived as being of high quality around the world, and European agri-food exports have reached an unprecedented €131bn, with a trade surplus of €19bn.

Recent trade talks, on TTIP or CETA for instance, have shown how sensitive the preservation of our high food standards is for Europe. A number of food safety incidents have exposed the weaknesses of our food safety-related tools, but each time we were able to respond and improve the existing systems. The paroxysmal bovine spongiform encephalopathy crisis of the mid-1990s led to a paradigm shift in the EU's approach to food safety, leading to a more integrated EU approach, 'from

farm to fork’.

We now have a large body of EU legislation in place covering the whole food chain, which is aimed at ensuring that food safety is granted throughout the entire process of the agri-food chain.

Naturally, food shall not be placed on the market if it is unsafe. Our system recognises both short-term and long-term effects on the health of consumers, including the probable cumulative toxic effect.

Moreover, potential direct and indirect effects of different foods are addressed by EU law through provisions on materials in contact with food, animal feed, or other agricultural inputs.

As Chair of the Parliament’s environment, public health and food safety committee, let me stress that well designed and enforced environmental policies also play an important role in providing safe food to consumers.

These policies should protect the food chain from potential sources of pollution, such as soil or water contamination by heavy metals, or persistent organic pollutants and bacteria.

Science underpins EU food safety policy, and we know that the interactions between science, policymaking, and citizens have always been complex, and are currently more intricate than ever.

Thus, our food safety system certainly needs to earn public confidence. In this respect, Parliament supports transparency and strictly monitors the functioning of the system.

Our President, Antonio Tajani, visited the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) in September 2017 to pledge the Parliament’s support to its work.

Parliament has welcomed EFSA’s contributions to the safety of the food chain by providing European risk managers with comprehensive, independent, and up-to-date scientific advice on questions linked to the food chain.

Parliament has also communicated its outputs clearly to the people and cooperated with interested parties and institutional partners to promote coherence and trust in the EU food safety system.

I believe that a core element of scientific credibility is transparency and the reproducibility of the results.

EFSA should encourage stakeholders and citizens to participate regularly, provide input that is consistent with the development of scientific outputs, and prevent conflicts of interests. It should also increase its cooperation with other EU agencies - such as the European Chemicals Agency (ECHA) - in order to create synergies and improve its assessments of public health risks.

Additionally, the EU food safety system should be able to quickly identify and respond to food safety problems. For instance, the system should be able to efficiently remove unsafe products from the market when necessary.

The functioning of the system and the rapid alert system for food and feed (RASFF) was recently questioned during the recent fipronil egg contamination incident. This incident clearly shows that we must make sure that the rules in place are actually implemented in the member states, as they are responsible for implementing and enforcing EU law.

Food fraud is also a major concern for food safety and needs to be better detected. Fipronil was not

authorised for use in poultry farms in the EU, but was nevertheless used by several farms in several countries.

Therefore, coordination and communication between the national authorities responsible for investigating food fraud should certainly be improved.

Parliament already expressed in 2014 its concerns about signals indicating that the number of cases of food fraud was rising and that fraud was a growing trend reflecting a structural weakness within the food chain.

In this context, it is crucial that the entire European food chain - including all stages of production, processing, sales and distribution - be transparent and fully open to scrutiny by inspectors in order to ensure that fraudulent food products can be quickly identified.

In conclusion, I highlight that improving food safety standards has been a continuous process; I am convinced that our strength is that we, as Europeans, have been able to learn from past mistakes to build an ever stronger system which maintains the highest standards in the world.

About the author

Adina Vălean (EPP, RO) is Chair of Parliament's environment, public health and food safety committee

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