

EU Member States accused of 'cutting corners' on food safety

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News

An EU consumer organisation has claimed that national government controls of those foods most likely to cause poisoning, such as eggs, milk and meat, are on the decline.



Photo credit: Press Association

The allegations are made by BEUC, the Brussels-based European Consumer Organisation, which conducted a survey of food standards and safety in 12 Member States: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Ireland, Netherlands, Poland, Spain and the UK.

BEUC says the number of food controls and the resources allocated to them are “dwindling” across Europe.

The “worrying trend” is one of the main findings of BEUC’s report, ‘Keeping food in check.’

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In order to verify that businesses comply with EU food safety and labelling laws, BEUC is now demanding that governments increase resources for controls.

The group also wants the European Commission to ensure that Member States' reporting is "complete, easy to access and comparable across countries."

All Member States are required by law to report their inspection activities every year and BEUC analysed data on official food controls from 12 countries.

It found that, with some rare exceptions, human and financial resources for food controls are decreasing across the EU, as are the number of checks; some control staff have flagged that they lack the necessary resources to carry out their duties and controls of the foods most likely to cause poisoning – such as eggs, milk and meat – are decreasing.

"National governments are regrettably cutting corners when it comes to checking the vital resources that are our food. Even products prone to causing food poisoning – such as meat, eggs and dairy – are subjected to fewer and fewer controls" **Monique Goyens, BEUC Director General**

BEUC goes on to say that Member States' "patchy reporting makes comparisons difficult, if not impossible"; Member States give "low to no priority" to labelling checks and few countries choose to publish the results of inspections of individual operators and to inform consumers about hygiene standards in restaurants and food shops.

Commenting on the findings, BEUC's Director General Monique Goyens said the report "shows that national governments are regrettably cutting corners when it comes to checking the vital resources that are our food."

"Even products prone to causing food poisoning – such as meat, eggs and dairy – are subjected to fewer and fewer controls."

She added, "Several scandals have recently hit the headlines, including tainted baby milk and eggs as well as meat unfit for human consumption. Consumers then legitimately wonder whether governments are effectively ensuring that businesses play by the rules – and whether they have the means to do so."

"Consumer mistrust in food products ultimately harms businesses and the economy as a whole."

She pointed out that new EU rules to harmonise Member States' reporting on food controls will start

soon. These rules will, says BEUC, make it easier to compare countries' performances and to help spot those "who are not taking their control duties seriously enough."

"Scores on the doors, 'smileys' and similar hygiene rating schemes help consumers decide where to eat and buy food. Yet, the new EU food controls law leaves it optional for Member States to develop such tools. Some countries already lead by example. We hope that more will follow."

Goyens went on, "In a single market where food may cross several borders before it ends up on our plates, we cannot afford weak links in the control system."

"All Member States must allocate adequate resources to food checks in order to protect Europeans' health. Regrettably, they missed an opportunity to obligate a greater number of food businesses to fund controls with the reform of the law five years ago."

About the author

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