

Food Safety: From farm to table

Food safety is vitally important. People in Europe want to be sure that, wherever their food comes from, and wherever they buy it, it is safe and wholesome. That means setting Europe-wide standards and taking Europe-wide action to enforce them. Doing so is a priority for the European Union.

The objective of the EU's food safety policy is to protect consumer health and interests while guaranteeing the smooth operation of the single market. In order to achieve this objective, the EU ensures that control standards are established and adhered to as regards food and food product hygiene, animal health and welfare, plant health and preventing the risk of contamination from external substances.

The EU food safety policy underwent a major reform in the early 2000's as a response to headline-hitting food safety scares in the 1990's and resulted in the adoption of the EU Food Law through Regulation (EC) 178/2002.

The Regulation provides a framework to ensure a coherent approach in the EU food legislation. It provides the general framework for areas not covered by specific harmonised rules but where the functioning of the European Internal Market is ensured by mutual recognition. It also lays down definitions, principles and obligations covering all stages of food and feed production and distribution, thereby guaranteeing a high level of safety for foodstuffs and food products marketed within the EU. This approach involves both food products produced within the EU and those imported from third countries.

In order to ensure the safety of food and feed in all stages, the EU Food law puts a strong emphasis on the concept of 'traceability'. Traceability entails that food and feed businesses – whether they are producers, processors or importers – must make sure that all foodstuffs, animal feed and feed ingredients can be traced right through the food chain, from farm to table. Each business must be able to identify its supplier and which businesses it supplied.

Through the Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed (RASFF), food and feed control authorities can exchange information in a speedy way about measures taken in response to serious risks detected in relation to food or feed. This exchange of information helps Member States to act rapidly and in a coordinated manner in response to a health threat caused by food or feed.

Food law, and in particular measures relating to food safety must be underpinned by strong science. The EU has been at the forefront of the development of the risk analysis principles and their subsequent international acceptance. The three inter-related components of risk analysis (risk assessment, risk management and risk communication) provide the basis for food law as appropriate to the measure under consideration. Scientific assessment of risk must be undertaken in an independent, objective and transparent manner based on the best available science.

To secure this independent, scientific risk assessment, Regulation (EC) 178/2002 established the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA). As the sovereign risk assessor, EFSA produces independent scientific advice and clear communication on existing and emerging risks associated with the food chain. This lays a sound foundation for European policies and legislation and supports the European Commission, European Parliament and EU Member States in taking effective and timely risk management decisions.

Food safety and the protection of consumer interests are of increasing concern to the general public, non-governmental organisations, professional associations, international trading partners and trade organisations. Consumer confidence is an essential outcome of a successful food policy and is therefore a primary goal of EU action related to food. Transparency of legislation and effective public consultation are essential elements of building this greater confidence. Better communication about food safety and the evaluation and explanation of potential risks, including full transparency of scientific opinions, are of key importance.

The EU is an active player in the development of international trading rules and standards and is committed to free trade in safe and wholesome foods and also to its international obligations particularly in relation to the Sanitary and Phyto-Sanitary (SPS) and the Technical Barriers to Trade Agreements (TBT) under the auspices of the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Food law should be developed in such a way that it does not arbitrarily or unjustifiably discriminate against any international trading partner and should not present disguised barriers to trade.