

# **From farm to fork: European policy on food and bio-defence**

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Ladies and Gentlemen

- It is a great pleasure for me to introduce this conference and I warmly applaud the initiative of organising this event.
- It shows that the vital importance of food and bio-security has been fully recognised, as well as the need for global awareness when facing potential threats to our security. Since 9/11 and the Madrid and London bombings, all possible vectors of attacks have been considered as targets.
- Although places such as means of transport and social gatherings are often considered as more likely places of attack, the food chain might seem to be less at risk. It is however a potential target that should not be underestimated as it concerns the daily life of citizens and would have a huge impact as it relates to what we eat.

- This threat is not new – over the years and across the world there have, of course, already been a number of deliberate attempts to contaminate food.
- Therefore we need to recognize not only the magnitude of the threat of food and agroterrorism, but also the need to develop synergies in front of common threats to our security.
- To cope with this crucial issue, the EU has undertaken a series of actions, across the broad scope of European policies, with the aim of improving preparedness and response to bio-terrorism.

## **I. PREVENTION AND PREPAREDNESS**

- The first area of potential vulnerability that I would like to highlight is animal health, through deliberate attempts to introduce a virus or a contaminant in animals or the food and feed chains, with a view to create a major animal disease epidemic and/or a food safety crisis.
- Essentially, the same defence mechanisms apply for deliberate introductions as with "normal" (or accidental or natural) introductions: early detection; sound traceability systems; rapid control and eradication measures; contingency plans and sound overall coordination.
- It should be stressed that a comprehensive and effective general food safety system is an essential precursor for preparing for and responding to agroterrorist attacks.

- However, deliberate introductions would put our food safety system under an acute pressure. Indeed, pathogens could be introduced in a number of locations, amplifying their impact; or more than one virus/agent could be introduced simultaneously to increase damage and economic impact.
- The challenge therefore is to prevent such deliberate introductions, and if they do occur, to take swift and effective action to minimise their impact.

## **A. Animal Health**

- As you are well aware, the EU has a bitter experience of recent animal health crises (BSE, FMD, Avian Influenza), which prompted tighter controls on both the identification of animals and their movements.

### **Identification of animals**

- In the European Union, all animals (bovines, sheep and goats) have an identification with individual codes. This is a powerful tool to react to the discovery of threats – deliberate or otherwise. It is also particularly useful when isolating and eradicating a disease becomes necessary.

## **Import controls**

Other preventive actions concern imports of animal products, where the EU has developed a comprehensive system:

- A legislative framework (including approval of third countries and their establishments);
- The official certification of imports;
- mandatory checks at border inspection posts.
- This is complemented by the inspections of our Food and Veterinary Office, the Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed and the **TRAdE Control and Export System (TRACES)**.

## **B. Food Safety and food chain**

### **European Food Law**

- Turning to the food chain, the cornerstone of the European Food Safety System is the General Food Law of 2002 on which all food law in Europe is based. It has been completely updated in recent years in the aftermath of several health crises.

It relies on 3 pillars:

- A general obligation for food operators to take necessary measures to ensure that their products are safe for the consumer; but also,
- Legislative means for authorities to control EU borders and to take emergency measures, with the support of a network of national and Community Reference Laboratories and Scientific Committees; and finally
- The Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed, which allows all Member States to be informed in real-time of any food incident that occurs within the Union or at its borders.

### **Food Safety Agency**

- Under the General Food Law, new tools were established for managing food and feed emergencies and crisis, such as the **European Food Safety Authority** (an independent Agency based in Parma, Italy), which is responsible for risk assessment.
- The European Commission remains responsible for risk management measures. This is important as it puts decision making in the political rather than technical arena.

## Traceability

- As regards traceability, it is obligatory for food businesses to withdraw unsafe foods from the market, and provide accurate information to consumers.
- Identification of the origin of farm animals, feed, food, ingredients and food sources is of prime importance for the protection of consumers particularly when products are found to be faulty or potentially dangerous.
- Food operators have to be able to identify any person from whom they receive food or raw materials. They must also be able to identify the other businesses to which they provide their products.
- The same requirements apply to importers. This approach is called the “one step back – one step forward” approach.
- Traceability of fruits and vegetables is established through labelling of country of origin and establishment. Usually, packaging of these products is done on the production site and they remain packed until final distribution to the consumers.
- More difficult is the situation for goods sold in bulk (for example cereals or sugar) where traceability is by batches, and products are often mixed up.

## **International Obligations**

- The European legislative toolbox also comprises a range of international instruments: SPS, TBT (under WTO), IPPC, OIE, CODEX.
- On top of these instruments, other international conventions like the Nuclear Safety Convention, the Chemical Weapons Convention and Biological Weapons Convention are also relevant in the combat against terrorist activities which may have an impact to the food chain.

## **II. PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSE**

- I would now like to say a few words on the human health aspect of bioterrorism.

### **A. Human health**

- In a largely border-free space such as the EU – where materials, products, services and people circulate freely – it is crucial that appropriate mechanisms and arrangements are in place in the human health sector.

- Tracing the source of deliberate releases requires a multi-sector approach combining data from human and environmental epidemiology with information from security services on an EU-wide scale.

### **Health Security**

- A programme of co-operation on preparedness and response to biological and chemical attacks is ongoing in the EU, comprising a series of actions grouped under four objectives:
  - a mechanism for information exchange and co-ordination;
  - an EU-wide capability for detection, identification and surveillance of biological and chemical agents in laboratories;
  - stocks of medicines and health services database; and,
  - binding rules and guidance, links with third countries and international organisations.

### **B. Information and coordination networks**

- There are now eleven sectoral **Rapid Alert Systems** in place as well as a law enforcement network which can be used by EUROPOL. I will only mention the 3 most relevant to us here today:

- The RASFF enables immediate transmission of information throughout the Community in cases where human health may be in danger;
- The RAS-BICHAT links the members of the Health Security Committee and also permanent contact points in all Member States; and,
- ARGUS – a new network of communication, in case of any alert (natural disaster, pollution threat or terrorist attack) which connects all Commission departments and Member States' relevant services.

### **International cooperation**

- As regards global co-operation on preparedness and response to health threats, the European Commission is part of the Global Health Security Initiative (GHSI) established by the G7+ partners (G7 countries plus Mexico plus the European Commission) in November 2001, in the aftermath of the US anthrax letters.
- The Global Health Security Initiative is targeted at concerted global action to strengthen the public health response to the threat of international biological, chemical and radio-nuclear terrorism.

## **Law enforcement bodies**

As regards law enforcement bodies, I will be rather brief as the classical police mechanisms are also applicable in case of agro-terrorism. Of course, the role of Europol has been highly strengthened since the terrorist attacks. Also, a comprehensive anti-terrorism policy has been developed in the last four years. More precisely, European Heads of State agreed in December 2005 on a European Counter-Terrorism Strategy along four lines: to prevent, protect, pursue and respond.

## **Conclusions**

- I have given you just a brief flavour of the key challenges at the European and global levels and how the EU protects itself and its citizens from food-related problems.
- In general, we consider that there is a well developed body of rules for alerts and contingency plans in the event of a crisis.
- The main differences between a terrorist act and an accidental event would be the dimension of the initial phase and the number of primary outbreaks.
- I would like to stress again that a sound and comprehensive food safety system is essential to give effective protection to citizens. This is the cornerstone on which further anti-terrorism measures can be built.

- The various means that we have established in order to ensure safety throughout the whole food chain has functioned and continue to function well.
- Our ability to respond to crises has been tested in numerous occasions, but not of course in the case of a terrorist attack.
- I should add that industry too has developed specific plans to counter any terrorist attack.
- Constant vigilance is clearly required. We therefore continue to carry out exercises to test communication channels, emergency plans and coordination of response measures across the EU, together with international cooperation (in particular the USA and some third countries).
- At EU level, we are continuing our reflections on Bio-Preparedness and Food Defence. In that context, I look forward to discussing with you these issues in the workshop this afternoon. We will have the opportunity to address the challenges that lay ahead. I am most interested to listen to your ideas and analyses.