

# Ensuring food quality - Harmonisation or mutual recognition of standards

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The Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development adopted an own-initiative report drafted by Maria **PETRE** (EPP-ED, RO) on ensuring food quality: harmonisation or mutual recognition of standards, in response to the Commission's Green Paper on agricultural product quality: product standards, farming requirements and quality schemes. Members welcome the reflection process launched by the Green Paper, and support the criterion of promoting the quality of European agricultural products while not generating additional costs or burdens for producers.

They consider it vital that there should also be conditions of **fair competition for imported products**, which tend not to meet standards comparable to those governing Community products. The EU's quality standards applicable to third-country products having access to the internal market need to be laid down on the basis of agreement in the World Trade Organisation (WTO). The Commission must seek to secure an agreement on the 'non-trade concerns' which ensures that as many imported products as possible meet the same requirements as those imposed on European farmers, so that the quality of agricultural products which meet EU requirements offers agricultural producers a strong competitive advantage.

The committee expressed concerned at the influence of the big retail chains on the general quality level of European food products. It suggests to the Commission the need to regulate the **reverse tendering practices** imposed by a small number of large European buyers, in view of their disastrous consequences for quality products.

**Production and marketing standards:** Members are concerned at the complexity of the European system of basic standards. The report calls for further simplification of marketing standards by clarifying the main criteria to be applied, and for the development of EU guidelines on the use of general reserved terms, such as "low in sugar", "low carbon", "dietary" and "natural", in order to avoid misleading practices.

It advocates **mandatory indication of place of production** of primary products based on a country of origin label, reflecting consumer desire to know more about the origins of the product they are buying. Such a system should also apply to processed food products. MEPs support the **Australian model** of labelling of the country of origin. They take the view that the use of the general European quality label, bearing the words 'produced in the EU', must ultimately ensure that European products stand out on the market, on the basis of the high quality standards governing their production. In addition, the **optional reserved terms** should be promoted as an alternative to compulsory marketing standards.

**Specific quality systems in the EU:** with regard to PGIs (protected geographical indications), PDOs (protected designations of origin) and GTSs (guaranteed traditional specialities), the report proposes Community technical assistance for the implementation of the systems in the Member States. It advocates further action to **disseminate information** on these systems, with Community financial support, both within the internal market and in third countries. The Commission is asked to step up its efforts, particularly at the political level, to bring about an improvement in PGI protection in the course of the WTO talks.

Members suggest setting up a **European Agency for Product Quality**, which would work closely with the European Food Safety Authority and the Commission. That Agency would also adjudicate on the increasing number of requests from third countries in relation to PDO, PGI and traditional speciality guaranteed products.

On the matter of organic food, the committee supports, in principle, the proposal for an EU organic label. It advocates the **compulsory indication of country of origin** in the case of fresh and processed organic products imported from third countries independently of whether they bear Community organic production certification. The report also suggests enhancing the credibility of European logo by means of a programme to promote organic products; and examining the question of dual certification required in many cases by major distributors, since this is resulting in a shortage of organic products on the EU market.

Members call on the Commission to provide criteria for quality initiatives such as **voluntary GMO-free labelling schemes**.

**Certification systems:** Members take the view that EU rules on the harmonisation of standards are unnecessary, and that there is no need to introduce new certification schemes for foodstuffs at EU level, as this would undermine existing schemes and mislead consumers. The development of **quality marks** must not result in more red tape for producers. Producers should be able to take the initiative regarding the use of such marks, and the intervention of the Community bodies should be confined to ensuring the protection of those marks with a view to guaranteeing producers a fair price for their efforts and protecting the consumer from fraud.

With regard to the international dimension, the committee notes the existence of a number of problems relating to competitiveness vis-à-vis the Union's main trading partners. It is concerned at pressure from products from emerging countries which do not meet the same quality standards and often benefit from lax controls. It reiterates the need to implement the concept of '**qualified market access**', as affirmed in numerous resolutions of Parliament.

The report supports action to communicate the benefits of the EU's policies for food quality and safety, and emphasises the potential role of EU funding in this area.

Lastly, the report calls for the creation of sales promotion programmes for **local markets**, to promote local processing and marketing initiatives. This could be done by producer cooperatives, which boost added value in rural areas.