Beef: identification and registration of animals and labelling of beef

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In this report to the Council and the European Parliament, the Commission evaluates the application of the legislation on beef and veal labelling by the Member States, examines the feasibility of extending beef origin labelling to processed beef products and beef prepared by operators in the restaurant and institutional catering sector, and formulates proposals that will serve as a basis for discussion. The report concludes that the Community beef labelling legislation has provided the guarantees demanded by the consumer as regards beef origin traceability and labelling. It has greatly helped to restore consumer confidence and to return beef consumption to previous levels in the European Union and should therefore be maintained. However, according to the European meat trade sector it has led to a degree of re-nationalisation of trade in beef, particularly in the case of beef products sold directly to final consumers (i. e. the retail sector). For that reason the possibility of indicating EU origin instead of national origin without weakening consumer guarantees could be studied. That possibility would be restricted to establishments preparing beef cuts intended directly for final consumers. In that situation it would be up to those operators to decide whether to indicate a national or a Community origin depending on the requirements of consumers and the distribution sector. There have also been technical difficulties in application, relating to constraints on the homogeneity of beef cut batches in secondary cutting plants, the constitution and labelling of beef trimming batches, providing consumer information for non-pre-wrapped products and the voluntary beef labelling scheme. Therefore, without affecting consumer guarantees, the Commission proposes the adoption, under the management committee procedure, of a number of measures designed to improve and facilitate application of this Regulation. These are: - allowing beef from more than one primary cutting plant to be combined within the same secondary cutting batch; - adopting simplified measures for labelling trimmings and for labelling beef products sold unwrapped; - facilitating mutual recognition of approvals granted by competent national or regional authorities for the specifications provided for under the voluntary beef labelling scheme. On the other hand, the Commission is not in favour of extending the beef origin labelling provisions to processed beef products, products composed of beef and other ingredients or cooked beef prepared by institutional caterers, restaurants and fast-food outlets. It feels that this would be particularly difficult for the operators to apply for both technical and commercial reasons. While Regulation 1760/2000/EC has helped to restore consumer confidence and re-establish beef consumption, extending its scope would merely bring extra constraints and expense without any extra safeguards for public health or any impact on beef consumption: the cost /benefit ratio of such a measure would be disadvantageous. Where minced-meat production is concerned, the Commission feels that introducing the possibility of combining beef from more thanone slaughter country in the same batch of minced meat would result in origin traceability problems. With this report, the Commission would like to engage the Council and the European Parliament in a discussion of its assessment of the situation and the need, if any, to amend the rules in force. Once the matter has been examined by the Council and Parliament, and in the light of contributions to the debate by the various stakeholders, the Commission will make appropriate proposals.