Food law in the European Union. Green paper

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The current ·profoundly muddled· state of Community food law must be rectified by making it transparent and user-friendly, the Committee concluded. The committee voiced this view in a motion for a resolution which it adopted on the basis of a non-legislative report by Mrs Ilona GRAENITZ (PES, A) on a recent Commission Green Paper on the general principles of food law in the European Union. The green paper, produced in the wake of the BSE crisis, seeks to provide guidelines for the future development of European food law. The report points out that 20% of household incomes on average is spent on food products in the Union. Food growing and production employ 2.3 million workers and the EU is a major food exporter, which had a trading surplus of ECU 10 billion in 1996. In its motion, the committee called on the Commission to propose a framework directive on food and to devise a European food policy which took account of healthy eating and food quality. Consumer protection legislation could be supplemented by self-imposed commitments by industry. Existing legislation should be adjusted promptly to reflect new scientific findings. The motion noted that European food law rested on the principle of preventive health-care and consumer protection. As part of an integrated ·farm-to-table· approach to food safety and quality, the Commission should start by incorporating environmental protection into food policy, the ultimate objective being sustainable food production. Food inspection by Member States should be improved. Only safe wholesome food fit for human consumption should be placed on the market. Many illnesses were attributable to nutrition: education on nutrition and health should be promoted. However, claims concerning the health value of food should only be allowed if confirmed independently, Labelling (including for food in bulk) should be clear and new sources of consumer information (eg the Internet) should be developed. Food allergy sufferers should get the labelling they needed. Ambiguities concerning liability (eg that of farmers) should be dispelled and the possibility of a general Community liability (if the producer cannot be identified) should be considered. Every marketer of food should, in principle, be held responsible under criminal and administrative law within his actual sphere of influence. On the international front, the committee insisted that future World Trade Organization agreements acknowledge the importance of legitimate consumer concerns, including ethical and religious concerns about certain methods of production. Consumer participation was needed in the FAO/WHO Codex Alimentarius food safety programme. The same standards that governed Community-produced food for the internal market should apply to food imports from and exports to third countries. International trade in food products must not be promoted at the expense of public health protection, animal welfare or the environment. EU candidate countries must accept the link between agricultural policy, public health and food policy. On agriculture, the motion called for chemical residues to be kept well below the legal maximum and for the feeding of antibiotics to be strictly regulated. The ban on hormone-treated meat should stay. The EU should fund organic and sustainable agricultural practices. A precautionary approach should govern the evaluation of applications for the marketing of genetically modified organisms intended to enter the food chain.