Food safety: action plan, European Food Authority. White Paper

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PURPOSE : to present the White Paper on Food Safety. CONTENT : the main aim of this paper is to achieve the highest possible level of health protection for Europe's food consumers. The White Paper sets out a radical plan: a major programme of legislative reform is proposed to complete the EU's "farm to table" approach as well as the establishment of a new European Food Authority. Achieving the highest standards of food safety in the EU is a key policy priority. The guiding principle throughout the White Paper is that food safety policy must be based on a comprehensive, integrated approach. The White Paper envisages the establishment of an European Food Authority based on the principles of the highest standards of independence, of scientific excellence and of transparency in its operations. Therefore, the Authority must be guided by the best science, be independent of industrial and political interests, be open to rigorous public scrutiny, be scientifically authoritative and work closely with national scientific bodies. The tasks of the Authority will essentially concentrate on risk assessment and risk communication. Risk management, - including legislation and control, should remain the responsibility of the European institutions which are accountable to the European public. The envisaged tasks of the Authority will comprise: - establishment of risk assessment through scientific advice; - information gathering and analysis; - communication; - rapid alert. The White Paper is not prescriptive about all of the details concerning a Food Authority at the European level, and the Commission, therefore, has not yet proposed concrete resource figures for the Authority. In addition, it is envisaged that the Authority should be in place by 2002 once the necessary legislation has been enacted. Before finalising its proposal the European Commission is inviting all interested parties to give their views on the European Food Authority by the end of April. A definitive legislative proposal would then be brought forward by the Commission in September of this year. The White Paper proposes an action plan with a wide range of measures to improve and bring coherence to the Community's legislation covering all aspects of food products from "farm to table". It sets out over 80 separate actions that are envisaged over the period ahead and intends to close identified loopholes in current legislation. The new legal framework will cover animal feed, animal health an welfare, hygiene, contaminants and residues, novel food, additives, flavourings, packaging and irradication. It will include a proposal on General Food Law which will embody the principles of food safety such as: - responsibility of feed manufacturers, farmers and food operators; - traceability of feed, food and its ingredients; - proper risk analysis through a) risk assessment (scientific advice and information analysis), b) risk management (regulation and control) and c) risk communication; - and the application of the precautionary principle ifappropriate. With regard to the consumers, if they are to be satisfied that the action proposed in the White Paper is leading to a genuine improvement in food safety standards, they must be kept well informed. The Commission together with the new European Food Authority, will promote a dialogue with consumers to encourage their involvement in the new Food Safety policy. At the same time, consumers need to be kept better informed of emerging food safety concerns, and of risk to certain groups from particular foods. Proposals on the labelling of foods, building on existing rules, will be brought forward. In conclusion, the success of the measures proposed in this White Paper is intrinsically linked to the support of the European Parliament and the Council. Their implementation will depend on the commitment of the Member States. This White Paper also calls on strong involvement of the operators, who bear the prime responsibility for the daily application of requirements for food safety. Greater transparency at all levels of Food Safety policy is thread running through the whole White Paper and will contribute fundamentally to enhancing consumer confidence in EU Food Safety policy.