Beef: identification and registration of animals and labelling of beef

1999/0204(COD) - 08/07/2004 - Court of Auditors: opinion, report

PURPOSE: Special Report of the Court of Auditors on the organisation of the system for the identification and registration of bovine animals in the EU.

CONTENT: The main objective of the audit was to evaluate the cattle identification and registration system, at the Commission (design, implementation controls and follow-up) and in the Member States (operational system allowing effective monitoring of animals from birth until slaughter and allowing verification of correct payment of all direct aid). The audit was carried out in the four Member States with the largest bovine herds (Germany, France, Italy and the United Kingdom).

The identification system has four components: ear tags, passports, herd registers and the computerized database containing the details of all cattle. This database is one component of the system and was to be operational on 31 December 1999 at the latest.

Cattle identification and registration systems were set up in the four Member States more than two years after the target date of 31 December 1999 and still have some weaknesses. For example, the passports of animals traded between Member States are not monitored, there is no exchange of information between national databases, there are delays in updating the databases and the level of reliability of the information contained in the databases must often be considered inadequate. The main finding is that the cattle identification and registration system that was designed does not guarantee the traceability of intra-Community or extra-Community cattle movements. These movements nevertheless involve approximately three million head of cattle per year (approximately 4 % of the herd).

The Parliament and the Council laid down the general framework of the system. The Commission was given the task of implementing certain components of the system, but responsibility for implementing the system lies with the Member States. The legislation did not include procedures for Member States to exchange data on cattle movements and the exchange was in any case compromised by the fact that data format varies from one Member State to another. All attempts to reconcile information from the various databases have failed. The Member States interpreted certain elements of Community regulations in different ways, in respect of the deadlines for tagging and reporting, the fundamental concept of 'keeper of bovine animals' and return of animal passports. The Commission was not given responsibility for adopting implementing measures for setting up and checking the databases. This explains, in part, the differences found between the Member States.

The control and penalty systems in place have not been adapted to ensure that they are appropriate to the various keepers of cattle, such as traders, assembly centres or slaughterhouses. In addition, the databases contain certain data, such as retagging rates and delays in registration, which the Member States do not use as control instruments. Control practices also vary greatly between Member States.

As far as checks on the implementation and monitoring of the cattle identification and registration system are concerned, the Commission has interpreted its own role in a restrictive manner and has given no guidance on the setting-up of the databases. No standardised management rules have been issued and no quality indicator has been developed as regards the operation of the databases. The procedures for recognising the 'fully operational character' of the databases are unsatisfactory and the Commission's role is too often limited to confirming the technical existence of the databases, without evaluating their actual operation on the basis of precise management rules or predefined quality indicators.

The Commission should be given adequate resources to take on a genuine guiding role in the system, in particular by drawing up standardised management rules, quality indicators and a format for the exchange of data between national databases. The exchange of data between Member States, and even with third countries, should be organised with a view to retaining control over intra-Community and extra-Community movements.

The administrative checks applied in the various Member States should also be compared and specifications provided for cross-checks to be carried out between the identification and registration databases and the IACS databases before the various premiums are paid. The system of on-the-spot checks should also be reviewed, including the penalty mechanisms, and specific approaches for the different types of keepers of cattle should be drawn up and an approach imposed which is fully integrated with IACS.