



THE EUROPEAN
UNION
EXPLAINED

Food safety

From farm
to fork:
safe and
healthy food
for everyone

Ensuring a high level of protection
of human health and consumers'
interests



THE EUROPEAN UNION EXPLAINED

This publication is a part of a series that explains what the EU does in different policy areas, why the EU is involved and what the results are.

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The EU explained: Agriculture

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Why we need a European food safety policy

Protecting the health of humans, animals and plants at every stage of the food production process is a key public health and economic priority. The European Union's (EU's) food safety policy aims to ensure that EU citizens enjoy safe and nutritious food produced from healthy plants and animals, whilst enabling the food industry — Europe's largest manufacturing and employment sector — to operate in the best possible conditions.

EU policy safeguards health along the whole 'agro-food chain' — every part of the food production process from farming to consumption — by preventing food contamination and promoting food hygiene, food information, plant health and animal health and welfare.

Its three general objectives are:

- to ensure that food and animal feed are safe and nutritious;
- to ensure a high level of animal health, welfare and plant protection;
- to ensure adequate and transparent information about the origin, content/labelling and use of food.

The task to ensure healthy food is a cross-border issue because much of the food we eat crosses borders. The EU is a single market: goods, including food, can

be sold freely all over the EU. This gives consumers a much wider choice and lower prices, due to increased competition, as compared to when food could only be sold within a country. However, this also means that the most important rules for quality and safety must be set as European-wide laws.

There could not be any free trade if every product had to be controlled in each country according to different rules. Those different rules would also mean that producers in some countries would benefit from unfair competitive advantages. Moreover, agricultural policy as a whole is an EU competence, which gives the EU the possibility to influence the quality and safety of our food via the rules and economic support that are agreed for farmers.

Thanks to these EU rules, European citizens benefit from some of the highest food safety standards in the world. Compulsory checks take place throughout the agro-food chain to ensure that plants and animals are healthy; and that food and animal feed is safe, of high quality, appropriately labelled, and meets strict EU standards.

In the modern global marketplace, there are many challenges in maintaining these standards. They include:

- preventing animal and plant diseases from entering and circulating in the EU;



EU rules ensure food is safe.

- preventing the spread of disease from animals to humans. There are currently over 200 diseases which can be passed to humans from animals through the food chain, for example salmonellosis: poisoning caused by salmonella bacteria;
- ensuring common rules are maintained across the EU to protect consumers and prevent unfair competition;
- protecting animal welfare;
- ensuring consumers have clear, unambiguous information on the content and origin of food;
- contributing to global food security and providing people with sufficient access to safe, quality food. By 2030, it is predicted that there will be a need to feed 8 billion people with an increased demand for meat-rich diets. World food production must increase by at least 40 % to meet that need and 80 % of this increase will need to come from more intensive crop production.

Five fast facts on EU food policy:

- *The agro-food industry is the second largest economic sector in the EU, employing over 48 million people, and it is worth some €750 billion a year to the European economy.*
 - *Food cannot bear health claims unless these claims have been scientifically proven and authorised by the European Commission.*
 - *The EU's animal disease eradication policy has helped to reduce the annual number of BSE (bovine spongiform encephalopathy) cases from 2 124 to 18 in the last decade.*
 - *As a result of the EU having introduced salmonella control programmes for poultry flocks, the number of cases of individual human salmonella (s.) enteritidis dropped by 60 % between 2007 and 2011.*
 - *The EU is a world leader in seed production: 60 % of the world exports in seeds and plant reproductive material originates in the EU.*
-

How the EU goes about it

The basic principles for the EU's food safety policy are defined in the EU's General Food Law, adopted in 2002. Its general objectives are to facilitate the free trading of food across all EU countries by ensuring the same high level of consumer protection in all Member States.

The EU food law deals with a wide range of issues related to food in general and food safety in particular, including food information and animal welfare. It covers all parts of the food chain from animal feed and food production to processing, storage, transport, import and export, as well as retail sales. This integrated approach means that all food and feed produced and sold in the EU can be traced from 'farm to fork' and that consumers are well informed on the content of their food.

The EU food law also establishes the principles for risk analysis. These stipulate how when and by whom scientific and technical assessments should be carried out in order to ensure that humans, animals and the environment are properly protected.

This common approach ensures that minimum standards apply throughout the EU. It helps EU countries to prevent and control diseases, and to tackle food and feed safety risks in a coordinated, efficient and cost-effective manner.

The basic principles

The EU's Food Law is based on the following common principles which have to be enforced by all EU Member States:

- *protection of public health, plant health and animal health and welfare;*
- *risk analysis and independent scientific advice;*
- *precaution;*
- *possibility to trace the origin of all products;*
- *transparency and clear, unambiguous information on food and feed;*
- *clearly defined responsibilities for all actors in the agro-food chain. It is the prime responsibility of all actors along the food chain to put safe food on the market;*
- *strict controls and regular checks;*
- *training and education.*

What the European food safety policy consists of

Consumers should be confident that the food they buy in the EU is safe. The first EU food hygiene rules were introduced in 1964. Since then, they have evolved into a pro-active, coherent and comprehensive tool to protect human, animal and plant health as well as the environment. They also help to ensure that trade in food and feed happens smoothly.

Precaution and scientific advice

EU's food policy is based on solid science and thorough risk assessment. The EU institutions are guided by the work of scientific committees and by independent scientific advice from agencies such as the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA).

EFSA was set up in 2002 and is based in Parma, in Italy. It carries out risk assessments before certain foods are allowed to be sold in the EU. EFSA provides scientific advice to the European Commission and EU countries, to help them take effective decisions to protect consumers. It also plays an essential role in helping the EU respond swiftly to food safety crises.

Controls

Under EU rules, rigorous checks are carried out to ensure that all products entering the food chain meet the relevant standards. They include tests for harmful

residues from veterinary medicines, pesticides and contaminants such as dioxins.

EU inspectors also visit farms and businesses associated with the production of food. National authorities carry out checks at the EU's borders to ensure that food and animals coming from outside the EU meet the European standards.

Additives and flavourings

Food additives and flavourings are chemical substances intentionally added to food to improve its flavour, texture and appearance, or to prolong its freshness. Such products are regulated to ensure they do not pose any risk to human health.

All food additives used in the EU — including preservatives, colours and sweeteners — are scientifically checked to ensure they are safe for human health before their use is allowed. This is done on a case-by-case basis. Once authorised, their use is most often limited to specific quantities in certain foods. EU rules also mean that any food additives used must be clearly labelled on the product's packaging.

Flavouring substances may only be used in foods if they have been scientifically proven to pose no risk to consumers' health. In the EU, there are over 2 100 approved flavouring substances, and around 400 are currently being analysed by EFSA.

Safe limits for food contact materials

The 'food contact materials' concept includes any material that comes into contact with food, for example packaging, processing machines, cutlery and dishes. EU rules establish the basic requirements to ensure these materials are safe. All substances used in the production of plastic food packaging, for example, have to undergo a safety assessment by EFSA before they can be authorised in the EU. The current EU laws state that food contact materials should not trigger any chemical reactions which might change the food's taste, appearance, texture or smell, or alter its chemical composition.



EU regulations to protect people, animals and the environment are based on scientific assessments.

Limiting feed additives, plant and veterinary product residues

EU rules require animal feed additives, veterinary medicines and plant protection products to undergo a full scientific evaluation to prove they are safe for humans, animals and the environment before they can be authorised. If they are not safe, they are banned. In some cases maximum limits are set for how much residue there can be in the feed.

Improving food hygiene

Bacteria, viruses and parasites can pose a serious risk to public health if strict food hygiene procedures are not followed. Well-known examples include illnesses linked to salmonella in poultry; listeria in dairy, meat and fishery products, and BSE in cattle.

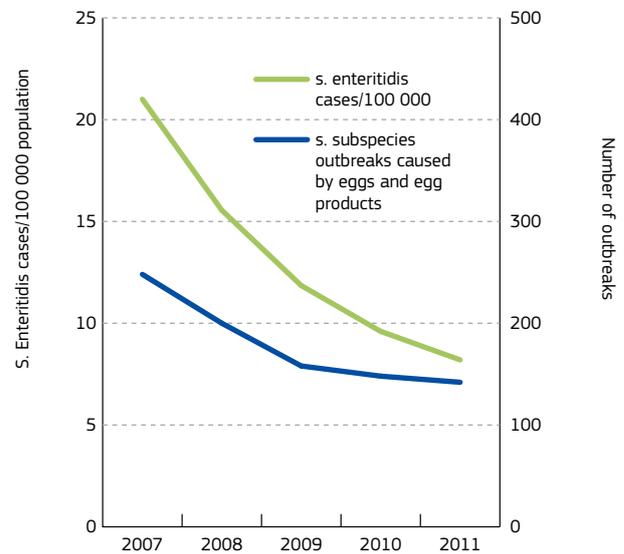
To protect EU citizens from these risks, EU rules require a comprehensive and coordinated approach to food hygiene across the food chain in all EU countries. Primary responsibility lies of course with the companies and people producing and selling the food. They have to apply compulsory self-checking programmes. The EU introduced salmonella control programmes in 2003 for poultry flocks in all Member States. These programmes ensure that proper and effective measures are taken to detect and to control salmonella and other zoonotic bacteria at all relevant stages of the production chain. Preventative action is taken mainly at the level of primary production, in order to reduce their prevalence and the risk they pose to public health. In addition to these control programmes, other control measures along the food chain, during slaughter, processing, distribution, retail and food preparation, also take place.



EU rules promote comprehensive and coordinated approaches to food hygiene.

As a result, cases of salmonellosis in humans dropped by 60.5 % in the period 2007 to 2011 and cases linked to eggs and egg products fell by 42.3 % in the same period (a decrease from 248 to 143 cases).

RECORDED CASES AND OUTBREAKS OF SALMONELLA IN THE EU 2007–11



Reducing food contamination

EU rules on contaminants are based on the principle that contaminant levels should be kept as low as can be reasonably achieved by following good working practices. Maximum levels have been set for certain contaminants (e.g. dioxins, heavy metals, nitrates) on the basis of scientific advice in order to protect public health.

Promoting better nutrition

In today's EU, five of the seven biggest risk factors for early death are linked to what we eat and drink: high blood pressure, cholesterol, body mass index, inadequate fruit and vegetable intake, and alcohol abuse. Individual EU countries, not the EU, have the competence to deal with public health measures that can address these challenges. However, certain initiatives are coordinated at EU level, for example: within the framework of the EU platform for action on diet, physical activity and health, and the high level group on nutrition and physical activity. Both bring together representatives from across Europe to tackle diet-related health issues such as obesity and diabetes.



Better nutrition can help reduce health risks.

Supporting food innovation

'Novel' foods are foods, or ingredients, which, in the past, were not significantly used for human consumption. In the EU, the legal definition is that they were not used before 1997. Examples include sucromalt, a mixture of saccharides (sweeteners) that is rich in maltose, and guar gum, a white flour-like substance made from guar beans, both authorised for marketing in the EU in 2010.

All novel foods or ingredients authorised for sale in the EU have undergone a scientific safety assessment. When the authorities give permission to novel foods, it includes specific conditions of how they can be used and how they must be labelled.

Clear labelling

EU food labelling rules mean that consumers receive comprehensive, accurate information on the content and composition of food, to help them make informed choices about what they eat. Food must be clearly labelled with key information on allergens and nutritional value, including the energy, fat, saturated fat, carbohydrate, sugars, protein and salt content. Food labels also include information on the manufacturer, seller, importer, storage conditions and preparation of certain foods. It must be impossible to remove the labels, and they must be easy to see, read and understand.

Food for specific groups

Certain foods intended for specific groups of the population such as babies and young children are subject to more detailed rules to ensure appropriate nutritional composition and consumer information.

Accurate health claims

EU rules on nutrition and health claims refer to cases where the producers want to present food as being beneficial to health, for example on labels or in advertising. Statements like 'contributes to the normal function of your heart' or 'reduces cholesterol' are examples of such claims. This is only allowed when the claim is scientifically substantiated and has been confirmed by an assessment from EFSA. In addition to the 31 permitted nutrition claims, in May 2012, the EU agreed to authorise 222 health claims following more than 4 600 applications.

Promoting high quality and traditional foods

Labelling rules also make it easy for consumers to identify organic food, quality products or foods produced in a certain way. Specific EU logos are used for products linked to a specific geographical origin: protected designation of origin (PDO) and protected geographical indication (PGI); or those prepared or produced in a traditional manner: traditional speciality guaranteed (TSG).

The EU's organic farming logo can be put on all pre-packaged organic food products produced in the EU and



Food in the EU must be clearly labelled with nutrition, content and production information.

guarantees that the EU's organic production standards have been met.

At the end of 2012, there were 1 138 products registered as PDO, PGI or TSG, including, for example, champagne (PDO), Parma ham (PGI) and gueuze beer (TSG).

Promoting animal health and reducing animal disease

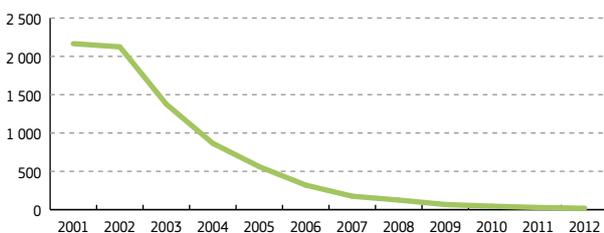
The EU Animal Health Law is based on the principle that prevention is better than cure. When animal disease outbreaks do occur, contingency plans exist to contain their spread, protect animals at risk and limit the impact of crises on farmers, the economy and society.

Each year, the EU provides financial support to prevent, control and monitor various animal diseases. This includes vaccination programmes, animal testing, treatment and compensation for culling. Overall, these programmes have successfully contributed to reducing the incidence of several diseases in the EU, including rabies, BSE and salmonellosis.

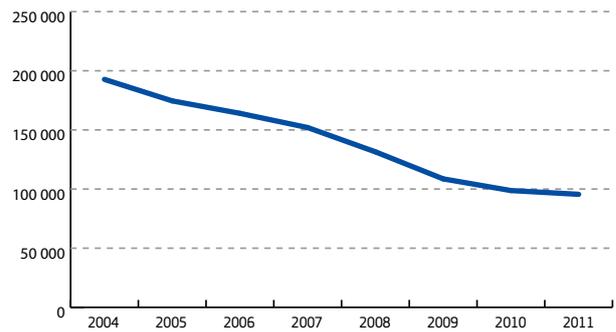
In addition, in 2012, the EU launched studies into bee colony losses and investigations into the Schmallenberg virus, an emerging infection affecting cattle, sheep and goats that was first identified in 2011.

If an animal disease outbreak is suspected, mandatory EU control measures must be applied. These include movement restrictions, vaccination, and compulsory culling of animals to prevent the disease from spreading. The EU has also built up stocks of vaccines for certain animal diseases which could have a major impact.

NUMBER OF BSE CASES IN THE EU



NUMBER OF SALMONELLA CASES IN THE EU



Preventing the spread of disease from animals to humans

Zoonoses are diseases such as salmonellosis and tuberculosis that can be transmitted between animals and humans. They are a major public health concern. EU rules ensure that animal diseases are controlled and that only healthy animals and their products enter the food chain. The EU also funds research into zoonoses.

EU spending for safe food

In the last 10 years, the EU has spent €3.3 billion on its food safety policy, including €2.2 billion on specific animal disease eradication programmes.

The planned EU budget for food safety policy for 2014–20 is €2.2 billion, divided between the following priorities:

- the eradication of animal diseases;
- the EU's emergency veterinary fund, including EU reference laboratories, training programmes and vaccine banks.



Living conditions for hens laying eggs are governed by EU animal welfare laws.

Ensuring a high level of animal welfare

The EU's animal welfare policy is based on a principle defined in the EU Treaty that recognises animals as 'sentient beings' — beings with consciousness. It states that 'in formulating and implementing the EU's agriculture, fisheries, transport, internal market, research and technological development and space policies, the Union and the Member States shall pay full regard to the welfare requirements of animals, while respecting the legislative or administrative provisions and customs of the Member States relating in particular to religious rites, cultural traditions and regional heritage' (Article 13 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union).

As such, the EU's animal welfare standards are amongst the highest in the world. They are based on the principles of the following basic freedoms: freedom from discomfort, hunger and thirst, fear and distress, pain, injury and disease; and freedom to express natural behaviour. Since the first animal welfare rules were introduced in 1974, EU policies have been developed to tackle a wide range of issues.

They include a ban on testing cosmetics and cosmetic ingredients on animals and specific rules for the treatment of animals at slaughter. There are also strict rules for animal transport, for instance for journeys of over 8 hours, which can only take place in officially approved vehicles with on-board temperature monitoring and drinking systems.

Animal welfare is considered an essential part of 'good farming practice'. This means farmers must observe minimum standards in order to qualify for support under the EU's common agricultural policy. For certain farm animals there are additional welfare requirements, for example laying hens, for which the EU has banned 'un-enriched' battery cages where there is not enough space for the hens to nest and perch.

An efficient tracking system for live animals and food and feed of animal origin

Every day, many consignments of live animals and animal products are imported or traded in the EU. In order that these can be moved safely, strict procedures must be followed.

The EU's Trade Control and Expert System (Traces) is a system for tracking live animals and food and feed of animal origin as they enter the EU and are traded within the EU. It links veterinary authorities across and outside the EU, and enables veterinary services and businesses to react swiftly when a health threat is discovered. Products are withdrawn from supermarket shelves quickly if necessary.

As part of the EU's traceability requirements, cattle, pigs, sheep and goats must be tagged with a lifetime identification number. This helps authorities and veterinary services to track their full movement history in the event of a disease outbreak.

All live animals and large quantities of animal products entering the EU must also be accompanied by a health certificate validated by an official vet specifying that they fulfil the EU's basic animal health requirements.



Livestock in the EU must be tagged so its origin can be traced.

Making it easier to travel with pets

EU rules help to ensure that pet cats, dogs and ferrets can travel safely and securely between EU countries. The EU introduced the 'pet passport' in 2004. This is a document which contains all the necessary information about the animal's identity and health status, including details on vaccinations, tests and/or anti-parasite treatments. This helps to prevent the spread of diseases such as rabies. The system also covers Andorra, Monaco, Norway and Switzerland.

Promoting international welfare standards

The EU works closely with worldwide bodies such as the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) to raise awareness and promote internationally recognised animal welfare standards. The EU also promotes animal welfare when it makes trade agreements with other countries in the world; and the EU always puts animal welfare on the agenda when it negotiates new agreements.

Stopping pests from spreading

With a crop output in the EU worth €205 billion per year, investing in plant health is essential to ensure sustainable and competitive agriculture, horticulture and forestry industry.

Without the protection of EU plant health rules, EU agriculture, horticulture and forestry crops would be exposed to a wide range of plant health threats with significant economic consequences. For example, EU citrus production (worth €4 billion) would be severely damaged if citrus canker reached the EU. The pest was recently found in the United States where over €800 million was spent on compensation and eradication activities. EU rules protect against pests through strict import requirements and conditions for movement within the EU. There are also regular inspections during the growing season and immediately after harvest. EU rules also ensure that plant protection products against pests do not pose a risk to human health or the environment.

Protecting plant reproductive material

Plant reproductive material (seeds and young plants) is the cornerstone for agriculture, horticulture and forest production. As the first link in the food and feed chain,



Plant health is essential to the overall goal of food safety in the EU.

it has a significant impact on the diversity, quality and health of crop production. In 2012, 19 580 varieties of agricultural crops and 18 450 varieties of vegetables crops were registered for marketing in the EU.

In the same year, the EU's commercial seed market was valued at approximately €6.8 billion — over 20 % of the total worldwide market for commercial seed. Some 60 % of world exports in seeds originates in the EU. Furthermore, the plant reproductive material sector is a highly innovative sector that invests a lot in research. The EU has established a system, called Community Plant Variety Right (CPVR), which grants intellectual property rights to new plant varieties.

The International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture is the global framework for access to agricultural plant genetic resources. The EU and all the EU countries have ratified it. An important part of the treaty is the Standard Material Transfer Agreement (SMTA). This is a model for a contract between two private parties, where the first party gives the right to use certain genetic resources to the other party and they agree to share the benefit if products arising from this material are commercialised. The treaty includes over 1.5 million samples, and 444 000 transfers using the SMTA are agreed every year.

A strict system for authorising and marketing genetically modified organisms

Genetically modified organisms (GMOs) are organisms whose genetic characteristics are artificially modified in order to give them a new property. They can, for example, be plants or crops that are resistant to drought, tolerant to herbicides or to certain insects or that have an improved nutritional value.

The placing on the market of GMOs in the EU is strictly controlled. GMOs can only be used in the EU if they are authorised beforehand. And they are only authorised once they are deemed safe for humans, animals and the environment. Once authorised, they have to be adequately monitored for any unforeseen effects.

GMOs can be authorised for food and feed and/or for cultivation. Applications are managed at EU level according to the procedure set out in the relevant EU legislation. This includes an assessment of the application by EFSA as well as by the national authorities of the EU Member States. The Commission can propose a GMO to be authorised only when there is a favourable risk assessment by EFSA. Member States vote within a regulatory committee on the authorisation decision proposed by the Commission.

Once a GMO is authorised at EU level, Member States can, however, adopt safeguard clauses at national level when a serious risk to health or to the environment is identified.

Any product containing, consisting of, or produced from authorised GMOs has to be labelled accordingly, except if there is an unavoidable and unintended GMO presence below 0.9 %. The labelling rule does not apply to products derived from animals which have been fed GMOs. The Commission is performing an exploratory study on “Genetically modified (GM) free labelling schemes” to evaluate the potential need for harmonisation in this field.

A list of GMOs authorised for use in the EU can be found on our website (http://ec.europa.eu/food/dyna/gm_register/index_en.cfm).

Ensuring the safe use of pesticides

Plant protection products, commonly referred to as pesticides, are primarily used to protect crops from damage by pests and disease. Their use is strictly regulated within the EU to ensure that there are no undesirable side-effects from the chemicals they



The EU sets limits on the amount of pesticide residue allowed in food and feed.

contain on people or the environment. No plant protection products are used or sold in an EU country until their safety has been thoroughly assessed under the prescribed conditions of use.

Active substances used in plant protection products undergo a rigorous approval process, which requires a thorough evaluation by EFSA of their impact on human and animal health and on the environment. Based on EFSA's evaluation, the European Commission decides whether or not a substance can be approved for use at EU level. Given the wide diversity in agricultural needs as well as climatic and environmental conditions across the EU, it is the final responsibility of each Member State to authorise and control the placing on the market of plant protection products containing approved active substances.

In specific circumstances, the European Commission can significantly restrict the possible uses of an active substance, when it is considered necessary, to address in a harmonised way certain risks that would undermine the high level of protection of human and animal health and of the environment.

EU rules on pesticides have also established ‘maximum residue levels’ which set limits for the amount of pesticide residue allowed to be found in food and feed.

Effective rapid alert systems

The EU's Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed (RASFF) was launched in 1979 and allows information on food and feed to be shared quickly and efficiently between all the relevant bodies at national and EU-level. It helps governments to act in a quick and coordinated manner to avert food safety risks before consumers are harmed, for instance by recalling products. In 2012, 3 424 notifications were transmitted through the RASFF. Over half of them were notifications where authorities had

stopped potential imports at an external border because they failed to meet the EU's food safety standards.

The RASFF allowed the EU to react swiftly to protect consumers, for example in 2011 in the case of *E. coli* and, in 2013, when a number of EU countries found traces of horsemeat in products fraudulently labelled as beef. Traceability checks began on the same day and the EU has since proposed a new action plan to tackle 'food fraud', including a review of controls and tougher financial penalties.

In a similar vein, Europhyt is the EU's notification and rapid alert system for plant products entering and being traded within the EU. It helps to prevent the introduction and spread of plant disease and plant pests.

Meeting standards: regular checks within the EU

Business operators have the primary responsibility for ensuring that the food they place on the market is safe. Strict and regular official controls carried out by the EU Member States' authorities ensure that the EU's high standards for food and feed are met and maintained. Official controls are about the enforcement of the rules. Controls are carried out regularly on all the operators along the agro-food chain by independent, impartial, well-trained authorities. They must use state-of-the-art techniques and methods, and they rely on a wide

Controls are carried out regularly in the EU to make sure food is safe



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network of official laboratories for any test or analysis needed to verify compliance with the rules.

The EU inspectors of the European Commission's Food and Veterinary Office (FVO) audit national authorities and check that EU rules are complied with across the EU. They are also active in countries preparing to join the EU and countries exporting animals, plants, food and feed to the EU.

Official controls at EU borders

The EU's border controls on plants, animals, food and feed imports are essential to safeguard animal, plant and public health and to ensure that all imports meet EU standards and can be placed on the EU market safely. Border controls are tailored to different products and commodities and to the hazard they might carry for health.

For example, consignments of live animals or plants can only enter the EU through designated entry points and if they have passed specific checks. Strict channelling and controls also apply to certain food and feed and to animal products (such as wool, skins, embryos, animal by-products). Most of these commodities must be accompanied by specific guarantees regarding their health status (for instance veterinary or phytosanitary certification).

Better training for safer food

This is an EU training strategy designed to increase knowledge and awareness of EU food, plant and animal health and welfare laws. It is targeted at the people responsible for official controls along the food chain in countries inside and outside the EU.

Since it began, in 2006, the programme has trained over 30 000 official control staff from 180 different countries in over 30 different subjects.

Research

Since 2002, much effort has gone into EU research linked to food safety and animal and plant health. It has covered a range of topics from illnesses linked to food allergies, to the effect of animal feed on human health and the environmental impact of certain production methods.

Worldwide cooperation

The EU works with its main trading partners and international organisations to promote EU food safety policy and make sure that all imports from non-EU countries meet the same standards.

One such institution is the World Health Organisation (WHO) with whom the EU works on the International Food Safety Authorities Network (Infosan) alert system. This network is made up of national contact points in over 160 countries which receive information on a case-by-case basis from the WHO about food safety issues and distribute it within their respective countries.

Global food security, development and humanitarian aid

The EU also makes an important contribution to global food security. In particular, it works to ensure that questions of nutrition are part of development, education and health policies. The EU works with developing countries to build effective food management systems that can improve food security for the poorest and most vulnerable people in the world. Expert veterinary advice, training programmes and funding for disease control and eradication programmes are other examples of EU action in the fields of development and humanitarian aid.

The Commission also runs a training initiative called 'Better training for safer food' (BTSF) under which there is a component for non-EU countries. Currently an €8 million project (BTSF World) is being implemented to assist developing countries to better understand sanitary and phytosanitary measures that will allow them to take better advantage of regional and international trade.

The safety of food we buy from outside Europe must also be strictly controlled.



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What happens in an EU food safety crisis? The case of E. coli

Between May and July 2011, an outbreak of illness caused by a virulent strain of E. coli left 55 people dead, 850 seriously ill and a further 3 000 unwell in the EU.

E. coli is a common bacteria found in the digestive systems of humans and animals.

This is how the EU responded:

- *The outbreak started in Germany, so German authorities immediately notified the EU Commission of the outbreak via the rapid alert system RASFF.*
- *EU rapid alert systems and response networks were activated.*
- *Scientists quickly identified the strain of E. coli responsible for the outbreak.*
- *Having identified the source of the outbreak — fenugreek seeds used for sprouting imported from Egypt — the EU ordered the destruction of all fenugreek seeds imported from one exporter and a temporary ban on imports of other risky products.*
- *The Commission held daily meetings with national public health and food safety authorities to monitor the outbreak and posted daily updates on its website to keep citizens informed.*
- *The Commission started working with national authorities, the FVO, EFSA, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control and the EU Reference Laboratory to identify areas for further cooperation and improvement and to draw lessons from this major food-borne outbreak*
[\(\[http://ec.europa.eu/food/food/rapidalert/index_en.htm\]\(http://ec.europa.eu/food/food/rapidalert/index_en.htm\)\).](http://ec.europa.eu/food/food/rapidalert/index_en.htm)

Outlook

The safety of our food will remain the focus of European authorities. In addition to controlling quality, the Commission has launched a number of specific proposals aimed at strengthening modernising and simplifying the current EU rules for animal and plant health for plant reproductive material.

These proposals, which were presented by the European Commission in May 2013, also concern the rules that govern official controls to ensure effective enforcement. They aim to improve the prevention and reduction of animal and plant disease, the EU's response rate to health threats, to apply new technologies and to ensure a better use of the rules.

Reducing food waste

Over 100 million tonnes of food are wasted every year in Europe — agricultural food losses and fish discards are not included in these estimates. It occurs at all the levels of the food chain: in primary production, food manufacturing, retail/wholesale, food services (catering), and at consumer level. This has environmental, economic and social impacts.

The EU intends to halve the level of edible food waste by 2020 as part of its resource efficiency strategy.

One of the short-term initiatives is to increase consumer-awareness of food waste. The EU launched a communication campaign in 2012 (http://ec.europa.eu/food/food/sustainability/index_en.htm). It includes tips to reduce food waste as well as clarification of the meaning of terms such as 'best before' and 'use by' date labels.

In parallel, all the relevant stakeholders are working to identify actions with an EU added value to minimise food waste without compromising food safety to complement the wide range of initiatives carried out at national and local level.



EU food safety policy will continue to evolve to ensure high levels of protection for human health and consumers' interests.

Find out more

- ▶ **European Commission's website on food safety:** http://ec.europa.eu/food/food/index_en.htm
- ▶ **European Food Safety Authority (EFSA):** <http://www.efsa.europa.eu/>
- ▶ **Questions about the European Union? Europe Direct can help:** 00 800 6 7 8 9 10 11 — <http://europedirect.europa.eu>

