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WHITE PAPER ON FOOD SECURITY

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.....	3
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	6
CHAPTER 2: PRINCIPLES OF FOOD SAFETY	8
CHAPTER 3: ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF FOOD SAFETY POLICY: INFORMATION GATHERING AND ANALYSIS – SCIENTIFIC ADVICE.....	10
CHAPTER 4: TOWARDS ESTABLISHING A EUROPEAN FOOD AUTHORITY.....	14
CHAPTER 5: REGULATORY ASPECTS.....	22
CHAPTER 6: CONTROLS.....	29
CHAPTER 7: CONSUMER INFORMATION	31
CHAPTER 8: INTERNATIONAL DIMENSION.....	34
CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSIONS	36
ANNEX	37

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Assuring that the EU has the highest standards of food safety is a key policy priority for the Commission. This White Paper reflects this priority. A radical new approach is proposed. This process is driven by the need to guarantee a high level of food safety.

European Food Authority

The establishment of an independent European Food Authority is considered by the Commission to be the most appropriate response to the need to guarantee a high level of food safety. This Authority would be entrusted with a number of key tasks embracing independent scientific advice on all aspects relating to food safety, operation of rapid alert systems, communication and dialogue with consumers on food safety and health issues as well as networking with national agencies and scientific bodies. The European Food Authority will provide the Commission with the necessary analysis. It will be the responsibility of the Commission to decide on the appropriate response to that analysis. A European Food Authority could be in place by 2002 once the necessary legislation is in place. Before finalising our proposals we are inviting all interested parties to let us have their views by end April. A definitive legislative proposal would then be brought forward by the Commission.

Food Safety Legislation

The setting up of the independent Authority is to be accompanied by a wide range of other measures to improve and bring coherence to the corpus of legislation covering all aspects of food products from "farm to table".

Already the Commission has identified a wide range of measures that are necessary to improve food safety standards. The White Paper sets out over 80 separate actions that are envisaged over the next few years.

There have been enormous developments in the past decades, both in the methods of food production and processing, and the controls required to ensure that acceptable safety standards are being met. It is clear that, in a number of areas, existing European legislation has to be brought up to date.

Following the Commission's Green Paper on food law (COM(97)176 final), and subsequent consultations, a new legal framework will be proposed. This will cover the whole of the food chain, including animal feed production, establish a high level of consumer health protection and clearly attribute primary responsibility for safe food production to industry, producers and suppliers. Appropriate official controls at both national and European level will be established. The ability to trace products through the whole food chain will be a key issue. The use of scientific advice will underpin Food Safety policy, whilst the precautionary principle will be used where appropriate. The ability to take rapid, effective, safeguard measures in response to health emergencies throughout the food chain will be an important element.

Proposals for the animal feed sector will ensure that only suitable materials are used in its manufacture, and that the use of additives is more effectively controlled. Certain food quality issues, including food additives and flavourings and health claims, will be addressed, whilst controls over novel foods will be improved.

The risks associated with the contamination of foods have been brought into sharp focus by the recent dioxin crisis. Steps will be taken to address those areas where the existing legislation in this sector needs to be improved to provide adequate protection.

Food Safety Controls

The experience of the Commission's own inspection service, which visits Member States on a regular basis, has shown that there are wide variations in the manner in which Community legislation is being implemented and enforced. This means that consumers cannot be sure of receiving the same level of protection across the Community, and makes it difficult for the effectiveness of national authority measures to be evaluated. It is proposed that, in co-operation with the Member States, a Community framework for the development and operation of national control systems will be developed. This would take account of existing best practices, and the experience of the Commission's inspection services. It will be based on agreed criteria for the performance of these systems, and lead to clear guidelines on their operation.

In support of Community-level controls, more rapid, easier-to-use, enforcement procedures in addition to existing infringement actions will be developed.

Controls on imports at the borders of the Community will be extended to cover all feed and foodstuffs, and action taken to improve co-ordination between inspection posts.

Consumer Information

If consumers are to be satisfied that the action proposed in 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 risks to certain groups from particular foods.

Consumers have the right to expect information on food quality and constituents that is helpful and clearly presented, so that informed choices can be made. Proposals on the labelling of foods, building on existing rules, will be brought forward. The importance of a balanced diet, and its impact on health, will be presented to consumers.

International dimension

The Community is the world's largest importer/exporter of food products. The actions proposed in the White Paper will need to be effectively presented and explained to our trading partners. An active role for the Community in international bodies will be an important element in explaining European developments in Food Safety.

Conclusions

The implementation of all the measures proposed in the White Paper will enable Food Safety to be organised in a more co-ordinated and integrated manner with a view to achieving the highest possible level of health protection.

Legislation will be reviewed and amended as necessary in order to make it more coherent, comprehensive and up-to-date. Enforcement of this legislation at all levels will be promoted.

The Commission believes that the establishment of a new Authority, which will become the scientific point of reference for the whole Union, will contribute to a high level of consumer health protection, and consequently will help to restore and maintain consumer confidence.

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 for strong involvement of the operators, who bear the prime responsibility for the daily application of the requirements for Food Safety.

Greater transparency at all levels of Food Safety policy is the thread running through the whole White Paper and will contribute fundamentally to enhancing consumer confidence in EU Food Safety policy.