Beat: Politics

EU and member states must step up food chain checks

Food safety

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USPA NEWS - The "horse burger" consumer confidence crisis highlights the EU member states' failure to enforce EU laws on food chain checks and also a lack of dissuasive sanctions against food fraud, said MEPs in a Public Health Committee debate with Health and Consumer Policy Commissioner Tonio Borg on Thursday

"What we have now is a crisis of confidence. We are getting more and more news about the impact and the scope of this labelling issue" said Public Health Committee chair Matthias Groote (S&D, DE).

"In the past we have discussed legislation on whether or not meat of different forms should be labelled, and member states have chosen the weakest option (...) We need to see how we can guarantee traceability and improve deterrence", he added.

"We need to keep things in perspective" replied Mr Borg. "We have one of the best food safety systems in the world. But this does not mean that problems do not arise".

Mr Borg pointed out that member states are responsible for enforcing EU rules, and reported that food in all EU countries was now being tested for horse DNA and traces of the painkiller phenylbutazone ("bute"). The findings will be made public, he added.

Public confidence badly shaken

"Public confidence has been badly shaken", said Mr Borg. To help restore it, he announced a forthcoming proposal to require every member state to introduce financial sanctions against food fraud, so that "crime does not pay".

Asked whether "country of origin" labelling rules should be extended to processed meat products, Mr Borg replied that an impact assessment study was on its way, and could be published at the end of the summer.

However, "this is completely unrelated to the current incident. This fraud is about the animal species in the meat product itself", he said.

"You said that the problem was picked up by a random inspection in Ireland, and that not much change is needed. But do we know how many random inspections there are in the EU? Do we collect reports on them?" asked Linda McAvan (S&D, UK). It seems to me that we don't know for how long this mislabelling has been taking place. And how do we know that it will not happen again?" she asked.

Virtual law versus real law

This view was shared by Corinne Lepage (ALDE, FR). "We cannot tell citizens that 'nothing is wrong' in the system. The best legislation in the world is worthless if there are no checks.

What we have is a 'virtual' law, but consumers want real law" she said.

Bart Staes (Greens/EFA, BE) noted that the scandal also had policy implications. "Member states are responsible for inspections, but the current funding cuts and staff cuts inevitably restrict the quality of checks" he said.

"The ethical and consumer trust problem is clear" said Ana Rosbach (ECR, DK). As meat moves between different countries, "it is becoming very difficult to trace, and we need a solution at a higher level. How can the European Commission guarantee that all member states actually check slaughter houses?" she asked.

Alda Sousa (GUE/NGL, PT) proposed setting up national animal health registers, "so that there is no slaughtering of animal treated

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