



Consumer Voice

Newsletter on food safety, health and consumer policy
from the European Commission's Health and Consumer Protection DG

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Commissioner for
Health and Consumer Protection

Making sure of a safe and wholesome food supply

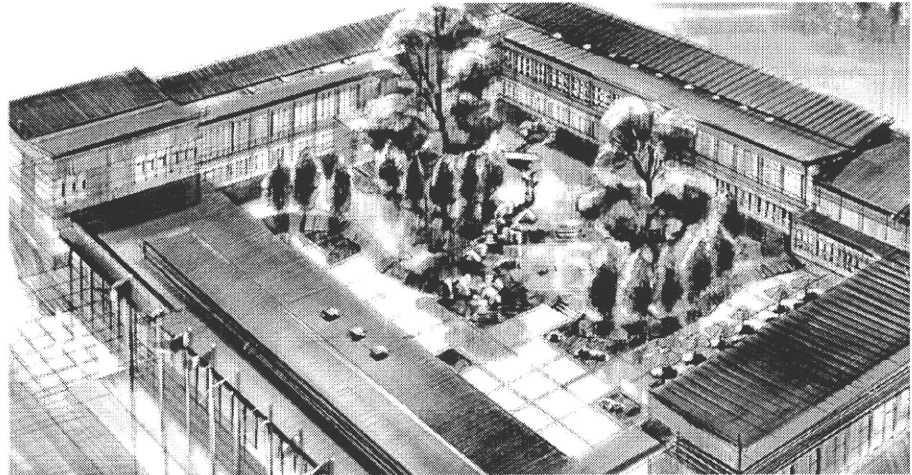
Our FVO inspectors play a key role in protecting the health of EU consumers. With its programme of inspection missions throughout the EU and the rest of the world, the FVO acts to support the efforts of national authorities in the maintenance of high standards of food safety, in the fight against serious animal and plant diseases and in ensuring respect for animal welfare provisions.

These controls are essential to the production of a safe, wholesome food supply. To make sure they are implemented, over 200 inspections were carried out in 52 different countries during the last year. This year, they are working steadily through an even more demanding work programme. Although the workload continues to expand, I am confident our inspectors can and will continue to meet the challenges as they have done up to now.

The FVO is an excellent example of the practical manner in which the EU institutions work in the interests of consumers. Run by the European Commission to enforce EU laws that have been enacted by the Council and the European Parliament, these activities have a direct and practical benefit for everyone in the EU.

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FVO at home and away

On the 19 July 2002, the Commission's Food and Veterinary Office (FVO) celebrated the official opening of its permanent home in Grange, Co Meath in Ireland. For the last few years, it has operated out of temporary premises while Grange was in preparation. The mood was festive as the Taoiseach (the Irish Prime Minister) Bertie Ahern, welcomed the FVO and wished them success and personal happiness in the new building.

The award winning building was specially designed and landscaped for the Commission by the Irish Office of Public Works. The setting is tranquil and seems far removed from any hustle and bustle. But appearances are often deceptive as in the case of Grange. Even as the opening ceremonies got under way, teams from the FVO were carrying out inspections in Slovenia, Paraguay, the Slovak Republic, Greece and Cape Verde. All in a day's work for the FVO.

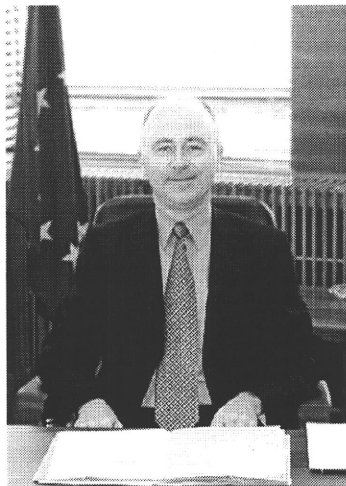
Taking responsibility for safe food production

A wholesome, nourishing and safe food supply cannot be taken for granted. Making sure of food safety is a responsibility that is shared over the entire food chain. From animal feed manufacturers, through to farmers and food processors and then to the retailer and finally the consumer, food safety must be ensured.

The application of food safety measures needs the support of practical, balanced legislation, laying down the rules needed to ensure good standards of food safety, animal health, plant health and animal welfare. The Commission, in its role as guardian of the Treaties is responsible for making sure these rules are implemented and enforced. This is the foundation for the work of the FVO – a Directorate of the DG for Health and Consumer Protection. The main role of FVO inspectors is to check how national authorities implement and enforce relevant EU legislation.

In general, inspections are targeted towards evaluating the nature and effectiveness of the national control systems in place and whether they are capable of delivering the required standards. In addition, they include quality matters such as labelling and organic farming standards. They also include animal health, plant health and animal welfare issues.

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▲ A new Director, Mr Colm Gaynor, the former Chief Veterinary Officer for Ireland, has recently been appointed. He started work in the FVO on 16 September 2002.

A large percentage of the food consumed within the EU is also produced there, so the majority of FVO inspections are carried out in the Member States. However, a lot of food – as well as animals, plants and their products – is imported from countries outside the EU. These are called “third countries”. The FVO inspects the situation in these countries also and checks the operation of the inspection posts on the borders of the EU to make sure they apply acceptable standards.

Planning inspections

Each year, the FVO prepares a programme of inspections that is published on the DG’s website. In deciding priorities for inspections, the FVO pays particular attention to factors associated both with the countries selected and the products in question. The total type of risk to be assessed is taken into account, including volume of trade, the animal or plant health situation and past evidence of health problems or control failures. Priorities might also include political considerations – for example, the candidate countries – and whether the EU Commission has an obligation under EU law to carry out inspections.

Other inspections are carried out in response to disease outbreaks, where the risk to the EU’s own health status from imports of animal, plants or their products, needs assessment. Inspections can be carried out in response to requests from countries looking for approval to export to the EU.

EU rules must be respected

The EU rules covering the handling of live animals and plants, and the processing, production, storage and distribution of foods, in both Member States and third countries must be respected. This is essential if consumers are to have confidence that necessary standards are being met. It is the responsibility of each Member State or third country to bring these rules into force and to implement them. This is why FVO inspections concentrate mainly on checking whether the control systems put in place by the competent authorities of these countries are sufficient to ensure that the conditions are being met.

At the same time, FVO inspectors also carry out on-the-spot checks on farms, markets, food processing establishments, and other places where food is prepared or handled, to make sure that the reality matches what should be implemented. This is essential if the inspectors are to have a full picture, and be able to give a true, complete, description of the real situation.

The FVO makes every effort to work closely with the relevant authorities, to find and implement effective solutions to problems. The authorities are made aware of the scope of the inspection and of its objectives well before it starts. Similarly the findings and conclusions of the inspection team are always discussed with the national authorities at the end of the mission, so that as full an understanding as possible of what needs to be done is achieved.

Inspections must lead to a positive result

The inspection is not the end of the matter. A positive result is the desired outcome so problems must be dealt with – and be seen to be overcome. As a first step following an inspection, the FVO produces a report of its findings and conclusions, making recommendations for actions to be taken by the national authorities to correct any shortcomings that may have been identified.

An action plan must be provided as a general rule, showing how the authorities will deal with the problems, and including deadlines for corrective action. The FVO works very closely with colleagues in the DG and in other parts of the Commission to monitor the

■ The inspection plan is not fixed in stone

Sometimes, an animal disease or food safety emergency means that inspectors must be taken away from planned work in order to deal with a crisis. Recent examples include the foot and mouth disease epidemics in several Member States and a number of food contamination alerts.

corrective actions taken. When all of these processes are completed satisfactorily, the final report of the inspection is published on the DG's website, together with any comments from national authorities.

The inspections themselves are only one part of the contribution that the FVO makes to maintaining and improving food safety, animal and plant health and animal welfare standards. Lessons are learned from these on-the-spot inspections that not only help to target further controls more effectively, but also help in the development of EU policy and legislation in these areas.

Inspections are wide ranging but focused

The range of inspections, carried out by the FVO is wide. Taking the last year as an example, the FVO gave particular attention to controls over the production of egg and egg products and also to controls on transmissible spongiform encephalopathies (TSEs). Checks were made on the way beef and beef products could be traced back through the production chain and on how import controls are operated in the Member States.

Other significant activities included checks on the controls over the presence of contaminants and chemical residues in food and on identifying where urgent steps had to be taken by the Commission to control emerging risks to consumer health. An audit was made of controls in the potato sector and the welfare of animals during transport was the subject of a number of checks in the Member States.

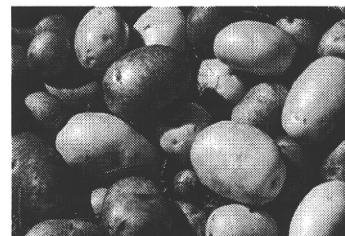
Human health and animal health are interwoven to a large extent and a great many of the FVO inspections focus on animal health for this reason. Some animal diseases – called zoonoses – are transmissible to humans. The FVO has evaluated controls over a number of these zoonoses recently, including verocytotoxigenic E.coli and brucellosis in cattle, sheep and goats. Inspections concentrated on the possible risks to consumers, paying particular attention to those measures in place aimed at preventing the transmission of these diseases to humans.

In addition, outbreaks of foot and mouth disease in four Member States in 2001 needed urgent attention. Waste food was implicated at the start of the epidemic in the United Kingdom, so checks needed to be made on the handling of waste food. In addition, the contingency plans for dealing with serious animal diseases in the Member States came in for detailed scrutiny.

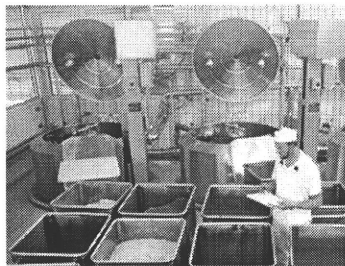
Ensuring EU standards apply across borders

The FVO has been working closely with the candidate countries to help them prepare for accession. An initial, information gathering series of inspections to all of them in 2001 found problems in many sectors and identified the main weaknesses. During 2002, FVO inspections are focussed on these areas including controls over BSE, imports, animal and plant health and food processing establishments. Particular attention is being paid to working with the national authorities to find practical solutions to the problems and to set out realistic timetables for resolving them.

The FVO also visited a number of third countries to check on the operation of official control and certification systems – and to monitor the animal health situation – so that it can verify that imported animals, plants and products meet EU standards. These inspections concentrated on controls over the production of fish and fishery products. In addition, close attention was paid to the risk posed by outbreaks of foot and mouth disease in several trading partner countries – notably in Southern Africa and South America. These inspections included checks on meat and on milk and meat products, to confirm that both public and animal health standards are being met.



▲ The FVO made an audit on the potato sector last year.



▲ Making sure of safe wholesome food supply.

Countries must act to correct shortcomings

During their visits, FVO inspectors may find shortcomings in the operation of controls or unacceptable standards that need attention. These can vary from relatively minor problems that are easily sorted out, to major ones with potentially serious consequences for human, animal or plant health, or for animal welfare.

To resolve this kind of difficulty, the Commission's services work with the competent authorities of the country concerned to secure the implementation of a solution that takes due account of the nature and severity of the problem found. In some cases, however, it is necessary for more formal action to be taken, either because the problem cannot easily be fixed, or because the risk is such that urgent action is required. Should a serious, general health risk be identified, the Commission can impose a safeguard clause on the Member State or third country concerned. This allows for a wide range of additional controls, varying from systematic testing of imports to the imposition of a total ban on trade in certain animals or products.

Where a specific problem is identified – for example where a food processing establishment in a third country is found to be operating in an unsafe manner – the Commission can remove it from the list of establishments approved for export to the EU. In this way, an immediate block can be applied to potentially dangerous products, including consignments that are already en route to the EU. Member States may be required to take similar actions in respect of establishments on their own territory, so as to avoid any risk to consumer health.

FVO gives strength to EU food safety controls

In the aftermath of the BSE crisis, the Commission committed to strengthening its food safety control function. This led directly to the setting up of the FVO in 1997, charged to carry out the Commission's control responsibilities in the food safety, veterinary and plant health sectors.

Since those early days, the FVO has grown significantly in size, and has steadily expanded the scope of its activities and responsibilities. As it has grown, so its working methods have developed, and the emphasis is now very much on evaluating national systems through checks on the performance of the responsible national authorities. In addition, the original commitment to control the whole of the food chain from farm to fork is now coming to fruition with a new series of inspections on the way that will cover different parts of the chain.

The FVO continues to evolve to meet new demands. The White Paper on Food Safety proposed a new way of developing and operating national control systems and to bring a more open, structured approach to the monitoring and enforcement of EU legislation. This concept is being refined, and a proposal for a new comprehensive Regulation on official controls is at an advanced stage of preparation. It will soon be submitted to the European Council and Parliament and will require Member States and third countries supplying food to the EU to prepare new control plans, following guidelines to be prepared by the Commission.

This new approach is practical and direct. The control plans and results of regular audits will be made public. This will give a clear view of how EU legislation on food safety is implemented and describe what the Commission, Member States and third countries are doing to ensure food safety, animal health, plant health and a high standard of animal welfare in the EU.

■ More about the FVO

If you would like to find out more about the FVO, including reports of inspections and plans for future work, please go to: http://europa.eu.int/comm/food/index_en.html

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