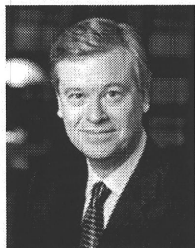




Consumer Voice

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

January 2003, Edition 1/03



◀ David Byrne,
Commissioner for
Health and Consumer Protection

2003 priorities for a fast moving agenda

My New Year's resolution is to sustain the political momentum of 2002 into 2003 so that we build on our successes and work towards the highest possible standards of animal welfare, food safety, public health and consumer protection that we can aim for. These are all policy areas that impact directly on our EU citizens.

We worked hard in 2002 and had very good results to show for it at the end of the year. But the reward for good work is usually more of the same. So, the Commission has begun the New Year in the way it intends to continue throughout 2003: we are getting down to delivering on existing initiatives and are preparing a number of new proposals. I welcome the assurance of support from the incoming Greek Presidency for these measures and look forward to working with the Presidency to achieve their success.

This is going to be a pivotal year for all of our policy areas. We have established what our priorities are going to be for 2003 and intend to put forward a series of initiatives that build on our already substantial achievements. In this edition, we introduce them to you.

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Building on achievements

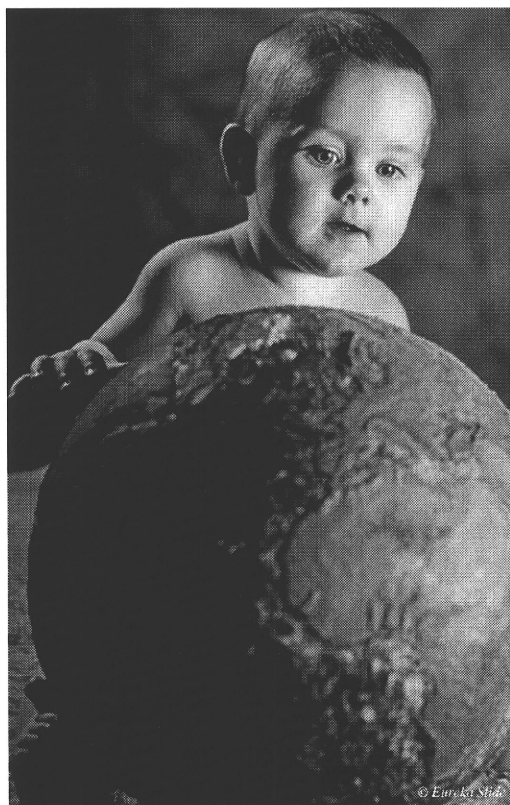
Commission priorities for 2003 include presenting proposals for a directive on fair commercial practices, a regulation creating a European Centre for Disease Control and further strengthening of EU food law. A good deal of attention will be given to delivering on existing initiatives as well as on proposing new ones. Agreement on the 2003-2008 Public Health Programme and on the 2002-2006 Consumer Policy Strategy in 2002, means these initiatives take centre stage on the work agenda as they move on towards implementation. Considerable effort will also go towards a push for the conclusion of a robust World Health Organisation (WHO) Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FTCTC) in May 2003, to consolidate the 2002 successes on tobacco control.

The creation of the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) was a key success for the Commission in 2002. 2003 is the year when EFSA comes into its own with its independent Management Board up and running and an Executive Director Geoffrey Podger appointed. Once Mr Podger takes up office in February, he will begin the important moves to propose Members for the Scientific Committee and Scientific Panels and he will convene the Advisory Forum. These are the necessary steps that need to be taken before EFSA is ready to begin its work of providing risk assessment advice for the EU.

Enlargement continues to be a priority

Enlargement is to go ahead which means the Commission will intensify its interaction with the candidate countries during 2003 so they can meet the high EU food safety, public health and consumer protection standards in time for accession in 2004. Over all of the policy areas, co-operation between the candidate countries and the Commission will continue and intensify to help the countries to fully implement the full body of EU law.

The candidate countries have already made considerable progress towards implementing EU law governing food safety and have also made progress in implementation the exacting standards demanded by the EU's "farm to fork" approach to food safety. The Food and Veterinary Office (FVO) plays a crucial role in monitoring observance of EU food safety law. Inspection visits to the candidate countries as they move towards full membership of the EU will continue to be a top priority during 2003.



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▲ Commissioner David Byrne and the boy band b4-4 promoting the "Feel free to say no" anti-smoking campaign.

Creating a "Europe of Health"

Poised on the brink of moving into action, the new 6 year Public Health programme is gearing up in the move towards implementation. As we go to press, tenders are getting ready for publication and the launch is being prepared. This programme is ambitious. It replaces eight former – and now completed – EU public health programmes with a single integrated scheme. Armed with full support for the initiative from the European Parliament and Council and with a budget of Eur 312 million, the Commission has rolled up its sleeves and is ready for a busy year.

"What we are aiming for, is to build a formidable EU public health policy for the future," Commissioner David Byrne told Consumer Voice Newsletter. "This Public Health Programme gives us a solid foundation for EU health measures to be carried out over the next six years. Now we are able to move fast in the right direction. What it gives us, is a programme that will streamline and reinforce EU action in the field of public health, moving away from the fragmented, disease-oriented approach of the past."

The Commissioner emphasised that this is not a time to slacken the pace but to ratchet up the ante. "We are still a long way from achieving my vision of a "Europe of Health," he stated. "In this respect, our proposal (now in preparation) to create a European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control will be of major importance as will the role played by the EU in the World Health Organisation discussions towards negotiation of a robust international tobacco control treaty this year."

The Commission will aim to consolidate its 2002 successes on tobacco control, now that it has received the backing of the European Parliament and Council on the Tobacco Advertising Directive. With the additional support from the European Court of Justice (ECJ), who validated the Tobacco Products Directive in December, this is perceived to be the right moment to move aggressively in 2003 towards ever greater tobacco controls at EU and international level.

A High Level Group on Patient Mobility was created at the June 2002 Health Council. Currently working on the first stage of policy development, the High Level Group is expected to come up with a set of conclusions on the way forward by the end of the 2003. In addition, the EU Bio-Terrorism Task Force will continue its vital work, reporting to the Commission and Member State governments on an ongoing basis.

Making the Internal Market work for consumers

The Commission is determined to tackle problems caused by a number of consumer protection rules that vary from one Member State to another. Such fragmentation deters citizens from taking full advantage of the EU's Internal Market and prevents them from having confidence that their rights will be protected. To do this properly requires nothing less than a root and branch shake-up and review of every consumer protection rule applicable in the EU, to find out where the differences are, which areas need to be covered, what are the gaps and what new areas need to be addressed.

Much of the initial work on this has already been done and the Consumer Policy Strategy is now up and running. It now needs to be seen through the legislative processes to completion. A number of initiatives for actions that will further the aims of the three objectives of the Strategy are currently in preparation.

Working towards objective 1 – to achieve a high level of consumer protection – a new proposal can be expected during 2003 for a new framework directive on fair commercial practices. This proposal will be geared toward promoting an upward convergence of national consumer protection rules. The Commission will also use the work carried out by consumer groups and businesses to recommend EU standards for building consumer confidence in e-commerce. Further planned actions include plans for a proposal covering EU action on the safety of services and

an action plan on European Contract Law to provide a more coherent approach to this area and facilitate the functioning of the Internal Market.

To ensure the other two objectives, the Commission will present legislation that promotes co-operation between Member State administrations to improve the effective implementation of common rules. The Commission will also propose a renewed legal and financial framework for the promotion of consumer protection activities throughout the EU for the period 2004-2007. The Commission will consolidate the EEJ-Net and Euroguichet (European Consumer Centres) Network so that cross-border problems for consumers are properly addressed. The Rapid Alert System for non-food products could be reinforced and a Product Safety Network between the enforcement authorities could be established.

The Commission will work across all policy areas to ensure that consumer interests are properly taken into account, in particular, in the areas of services of general interest such as transport as well as in competition policy. To make this all happen, the Commission is developing capacity building actions, so that consumer organisations can provide effective input into policy making.

Safety – the most important ingredient in food

The Commission will continue to work on a whole range of issues “from farm to fork” to create the right conditions for safe food for EU consumers. For example, the Regulation on Animal By-Products, dealing with concerns raised during the BSE crisis, will enter into force on 1 May 2003. A revision of the Pesticides Residues Directive is planned for the first half of 2003, while further new proposals on pesticides are being prepared.

The ambitious food hygiene package, presented by the Commission in 2000, should be finalised in 2003, including strict safety requirements for all foods and giving food and animal feed operators primary responsibility for food and feed safety right through the food chain. At the same time, a certain level of flexibility for traditional products and remote areas needs to be preserved, albeit without jeopardising food safety. This will be complemented by Commission proposals for a new, comprehensive framework for feed and food controls, and there will be a new proposal on feed hygiene. Both of these new proposals should be adopted by the Commission early this year.

EU food law has been strengthened since 1999. The changes have been far reaching but there are further changes to be made. Nutrition labelling, novel foods, fortified foods, dietetic food and food claims are all issues that need to be addressed in 2003 and beyond. Council has reached political agreement on Commission proposals for Regulations on GM food and feed and on traceability, but it remains for 2003 to see the proposals agreed by the European Parliament also.

Following up on the White Paper on Food Safety and stakeholder input, the Commission is making a proposal to define and set conditions for nutrition, functional and “health” claims in one single legislative proposal. The draft legislation covers claims used in labelling, presentation and advertising of food. On fortified foods, a proposal will aim to set common rules for the voluntary addition of nutrients. The Commission will continue to work towards the objective of limiting the presence of contaminants in food.

Animal welfare an ongoing concern

The welfare of animals on the farm or in transit and what they are fed are all areas that impinge on food safety and are therefore a primary responsibility of this DG. 2003 should see adoption of revised rules on the protection of animals during transport and there will be initial discussions on new proposals dealing with animal feed. Stringent veterinary controls remain an ongoing priority. These are to be stepped up especially in the light of helping the enlargement countries to get up to speed on the exacting standards of animal welfare required by the EU.



▲ Good food hygiene standards essential for safe food.

Council meetings during
the Greek Presidency dealing
with Health and Consumer
Protection issues

27-28 January

Agriculture and Fisheries Council

20-21 February

Agriculture and Fisheries Council

3 March

Competitiveness Council (Consumer and
Food Law points)

6 March

EPSCO Council (Consumer points)

17-18 March

Agriculture and Fisheries Council

7-8 April

Agriculture and Fisheries Council

19 May

Competitiveness Council (Consumer and
Food Law points)

26-27 May

Agriculture and Fisheries Council

2-3 June

EPSCO Council (Consumer and Health
points)

11-12 June

Agriculture and Fisheries Council

Work will continue at an intensive level on internal market control systems, external border controls and conditions for imports of live animals and animal products. Animal identification and registration systems will come in for a careful attention as will checks to ensure that establishments dealing with animal products comply fully with EU rules. The necessary veterinary public health requirements must be carried out to the letter, particularly in regard to transmissible spongiform encephalopathies (TSE) control and protection measures.

Greece to support 2003 priorities and initiatives

At the beginning of January, Greece took on the EU Presidency and with it the resolve to support the 2003 priorities set out by the DG for Food Safety, Animal Welfare, Health and Consumer Protection. Commissioner David Byrne welcomed the Presidency approach and said, "I look forward to working with Greece over the next six months. Encouragement from the Presidency and the determination from its ministers to further our agenda will create a fair wind behind our many initiatives."

High on the Presidency's priority list is to move the Commission's proposal for a Consumer Credit Directive into the fast track. The aim is to reach political agreement by May on the initiative. The Presidency is taking great interest on the development of a proposal for Fair Commercial Practices and aims to keep things moving on the issue by holding an informal ministerial meeting in May on the subject to back the Commission's report to Council on progress.

On public health, the main legislative issue over the next six months will be the proposed Directive on Tissues and Cells. The Presidency will aim to reach political agreement on this proposal by June and hopes to see the Recommendation on Cancer Screening adopted at the same time.

Greece and the Commission will work together to further developments on Patient Mobility and may move to launch further activity in the field of nutrition and the fight against obesity. Together, the Presidency and Commission will put an intensive effort into the negotiations toward finalisation of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control. Greece also wishes to get things moving at EU level on mental health and plans to hold a ministerial conference in March to get the reflection process started.

Greece will take forward the new Commission proposals on the official control of food and feed and on the requirements for feed hygiene. The intention is to reach political agreement on part 3 of the Hygiene Package in May and to be able to adopt joint common positions on the four items that make up the package in June. By March, the common positions on zoonoses, GMOs, feed additives and hormones should be adopted.

On food law, Greece wants to progress on the revision of the Directive on additives other than sweeteners and on a Regulation on smoke flavourings as agreement is rather uncertain at the moment. The proposed revision of the sweeteners Directive is expected to reach a Common Position during the Presidency once it has been adopted by the European Parliament.

Several important animal health and welfare items will come up during the Presidency. Of prime importance is to ensure adoption of revised legislation for the protection of animals during transport in the first quarter of 2003.

For consumer policy initiatives, go to: http://europa.eu.int/comm/consumers/index_en.html

For food safety policy initiatives, go to: http://europa.eu.int/comm/food/index_en.html

For public health initiatives, go to: http://europa.eu.int/comm/health/index_en.html

For the Greek Presidency, go to: <http://www.eu2003.gr/en/cat/0/index.asp>

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