



Press Release

Luxembourg, 15 January 2019

EU food safety system overstretched, say Auditors

Although the EU's system for protecting consumers from chemical hazards in food is soundly based and respected worldwide, it is currently overstretched, according to a new report from the European Court of Auditors. The European Commission and the Member States do not have the capacity to implement the system fully, the auditors say.

EU food safety policy aims to guarantee a high level of protection for human life and health, and to protect EU citizens from three types of hazards in food: physical, biological and chemical. This audit concentrated on chemical hazards.

The auditors found that the EU food safety model commands respect worldwide, but that it is currently overstretched. The legal framework governing chemicals in food, feed, and plants and live animals remains a work in progress, they say, and has not yet been implemented to the level envisaged in EU laws governing food production. In addition, the European Food Safety Authority, which provides scientific advice to inform European policymaking, suffers backlogs in its work in connection with chemicals. This affects the proper functioning of parts of the system and the sustainability of the model as a whole.

*"Food safety is a high priority for the EU; it affects all citizens and is closely linked to trade", said **Janusz Wojciechowski, the Member of the European Court of Auditors responsible for the report.** "But the current EU system faces a number of inconsistencies and challenges."*

Some Member States' controls cover certain chemicals more frequently than others, and their legal frameworks are so extensive that public authorities find it difficult to fulfil all their responsibilities. Checks by public bodies can only ever make up a small proportion of all checks carried out, say the auditors, and the EU model can best remain credible if public- and private-sector control systems complement each other. However, synergies between the two have only just started to be explored.

The EU has limited the use of certain pesticides based on hazard criteria. Nevertheless, explain the auditors, residues of such pesticides may be tolerated in products imported into the EU if a risk assessment has shown that there is no risk to consumers.

The purpose of this press release is to convey the main messages of the European Court of Auditors' special report. The full report is available at www.eca.europa.eu.

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The auditors also identified limitations in the control system as Member States face difficulties in determining the nature of enforcement action in cases of non-compliance.

The auditors recommend that the European Commission should:

- assess potential changes to the legislation governing chemical hazards in the light of the capacity to apply it consistently;
- further encourage complementarity, so that Member State public authorities can rely more extensively on checks carried out by the private sector;
- explain what action it will take on pesticide residues in food to maintain the same level of assurance for both EU produced and imported food while remaining compliant with WTO rules;
- give Member States further guidance on the application of enforcement measures and enhance its procedures for monitoring compliance with EU food rules.

Note to Editors

According to the World Health Organization, European citizens enjoy one of the highest levels of assurance in the world on the safety of their food. The strength of the EU model is based on:

- a governance structure with the division of responsibilities between the two EU decentralised agencies and the Commission, which separates risk assessment from risk management;
- the goal of assessing the safety of chemicals before they are used in the food chain;
- the clear allocation of responsibilities between the private sector and public control authorities.

In addition, the EU requires non-EU countries to comply with EU standards in order to guarantee that food imported to the EU fulfils the same high standards of safety.

The ECA presents its special reports to the European Parliament and Council of the EU, as well as to other interested parties such as national parliaments, industry stakeholders and representatives of civil society. The vast majority of the recommendations we make in our reports are put into practice. This high level of take-up underlines the benefit of our work to EU citizens.

Special report 2/2019 “Chemical hazards in our food: EU food safety policy protects us but faces challenges” is available on the ECA website (eca.europa.eu) in 23 EU languages.