



Directorate-General for Education and Culture

# Healthy food for Europe's citizens

## The European Union and food quality



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# Healthy food for Europe's citizens

The European Union and food quality



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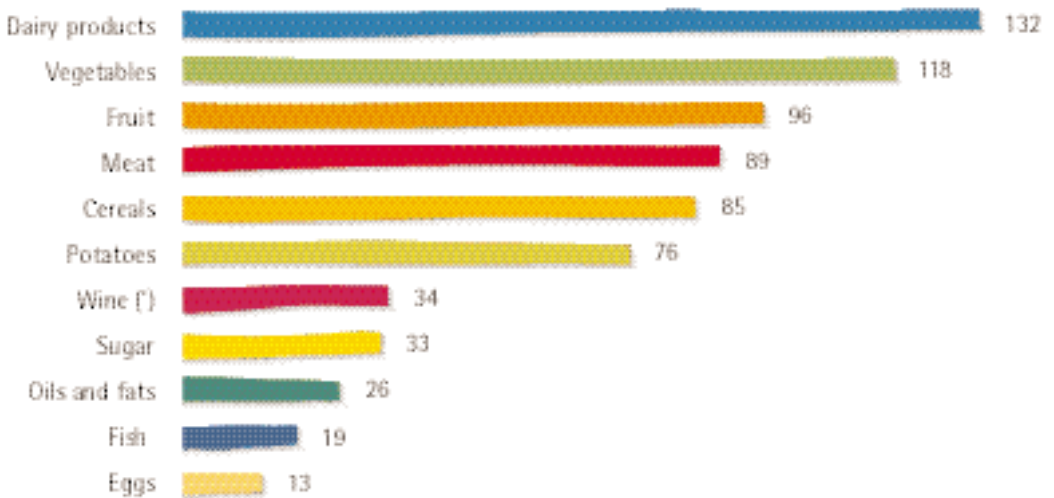
# The European Union and food quality

Over the last few decades, the public has become increasingly concerned about food safety and quality. Consumers want to be sure that the food they buy in supermarkets or eat in restaurants is safe, nutritious and wholesome, as well as being produced to a certain standard. Events like the outbreak of BSE or 'mad cow' disease or the crisis about dioxin in food have increased overall anxiety about food safety. In addition to safety issues, more people are focusing on the quality of the food they eat. Consumers are demanding the highest possible standards from farmers, food companies and retailers. They are also showing more interest in how and where food is produced, with growing demand for organic produce or meat from animals reared under very high welfare standards.

Addressing consumers' safety concerns and quality expectations is a major responsibility for the European Union. Over the last 40 years, the EU has developed a comprehensive set of rules, standards and monitoring practices to guarantee that the food we eat is as safe and appetising as possible. The Union is involved in measures at every stage in the food manufacturing process, from the farm to the factory to the fork, to ensure that what we eat is safe and healthy. Some of the tasks are carried out by the industry itself, some by the Member States, and others by the European Commission and the special agencies and bodies it controls. However, the Commission has overall responsibility for ensuring that standards are applied equally across the Union.

The system has developed a great deal in the last 10 years, partly in response to food crises, but also because the EU has created a single market in foodstuffs, meaning that all internal barriers to trade within the EU have been scrapped. As the Union now only has one single frontier for all imports, the EU is responsible for ensuring that foodstuffs from outside the EU are as safe as those produced in the Member States. The Commission also represents the interests of the Union's consumers in international bodies dealing with trade issues, food standards or health questions such as animal diseases.

This brochure seeks to explain what the Union does at each stage of the process to maintain the highest standards of food safety and quality.



*What we eat: Average food consumption, kg/person in the EU, 1998.*  
 (l) litre/person.

# Farming policy: from quantity to quality

The first place to start promoting high food safety and quality standards is, of course, on the farm itself. Through the common agricultural policy (CAP), the European Union encourages farmers to produce high quality agricultural products across the whole spectrum, ranging from meat and dairy products to cereals, fruit and vegetables. Over the past decade, the CAP has been modified to put greater emphasis on meeting consumers' quality expectations.

As well as producing adequate supplies of safe, wholesome food, one of the key aims of the CAP is to provide farmers with a decent living by guaranteeing them a stable market for their products. When the policy was first created, the main instrument for achieving its aims was price support, whereby farmers would be guaranteed a certain return when selling their products. This led to the criticism, however, that the CAP encouraged farmers to produce as much as possible, without taking account of the quality of what they grew. While this criticism was exaggerated, the CAP now offers many incentives for farmers to improve the quality of their production.

Price support is now a less important part of how the CAP operates while the practice of buying up product surpluses has been scaled back. This means that farmers have more incentive to respond to market demands for different types and standards of agricultural products. If the quality of the meat or cereals they produce is



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higher it will secure them a better price on the market. The policy means that farmers can respond to consumers' demands for greater choice and diversity of products.

*The EU agricultural policy induces farmers to improve the quality of food*

Other elements of the CAP reward farmers for less intensive production. Livestock farmers receive higher payments if they keep the number of animals in their holdings within set limits.

## ***Stronger emphasis on quality***

The thinking behind the CAP has also changed. Originally designed to eliminate the food shortages of the post-war period, the policy has been adapted to recognise the multi-functional role that agriculture plays in European society. Farmers are not just producers of food. They also

provide a vital service in protecting the natural environment and preserving the rural heritage which all of us can enjoy. These responsibilities mean additional costs for farmers such as requiring them to continue to farm in adverse conditions where the land is poor, for example. In recognition of this, the CAP aims to compensate farmers for providing these services, which in turn has a beneficial effect on food quality.

By keeping farming alive in all parts of the Union, it ensures a greater degree of diversity of food products and types of farming than in other parts of the world where economic factors may have a stronger influence in policy-making.

Following the incident involving contamination of foodstuffs with dioxin in 1999, which was traced to adulterated animal feed, the EU is also planning to tighten up controls on animal rations.

### *Opportunities for rural areas*

Farmers also receive extra incentives to improve the quality of their pro-

duction through the European Union's rural development policy.

This aims to increase the competitiveness of farming and promote employment opportunities for the rural population.

Rural development schemes offer special funding to help farmers upgrade the quality of their production and their marketing efforts, so that they can secure a better price from consumers for their goods. Funds are also available to develop markets for niche products, especially those with special regional characteristics which are valued by consumers. The EU can offer additional help through labelling schemes which provide consumers with assurances about how and where foodstuffs are produced.

### *Organic farming on the rise*

Over recent years, consumer demand for organic products has increased dramatically. By 'organic' we mean foodstuffs which have been produced without using many of the chemical pesticides and herbicides and animal medicines used in farming today. Sales of organic foodstuffs have grown by around 40 % a year and now account for 3 % of all trade in food in the European Union. The area of organically farmed land trebled between 1993 and 1997 to reach 2.2 million hectares. To encourage the growth of organic production and to improve consumers' safeguards when they buy organic produce, the European Union has laid down a set of rules governing organic production.

These include the types of products which can be used to treat plants or soil in the case of cereals or fruit and vegetables, and the types of feed and

*The strong growth in organic farming is encouraged by the EU rules*



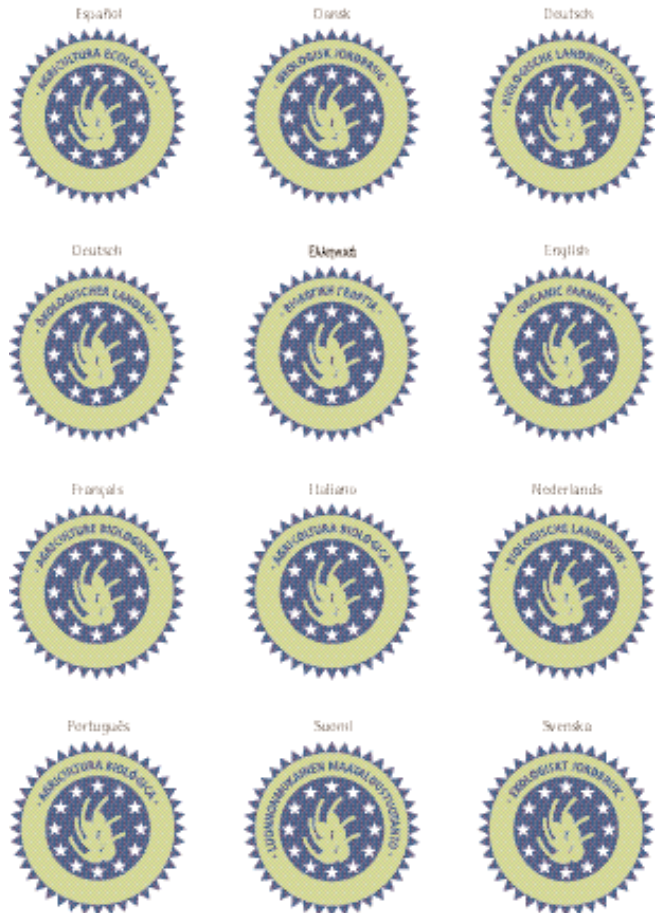
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animal medicines which can be used in animal production. Given that some products can leave residues in soil for a long time after use, the EU also requires farmers to have followed these guidelines for at least two years before their products can qualify as organic. The same rules apply to products imported from outside the European Union which are marketed as 'organic'.

To ensure that consumers know what they are getting when they buy products claiming to be organic, the European Union has also established rules for labelling. Although labels can vary from one EU country to another, they must bear the words 'Organic farming—EEC control system' which is proof that a grower has met EU requirements and has been subject to controls by national authorities. In 1999 an EU-wide 'organic' label was also agreed.

Since the transition to organic production takes two or more years, the EU offers various forms of support to farmers wishing to switch from conventional production methods. Most of the funding comes from the EU's budget for agri-environmental measures which provides aid for farmers who work in a way which reduces the impact on the environment. Funds to support organic farmers account for 8 % of the total agri-environment budget and farmers can receive payments of up to 900 euro per hectare to compensate them for the short-term economic losses of switching to organic production.



*Clear signs: An EU-wide label for organic products was adopted in 1999 as an addition to national labelling systems. The label is put on the food package in the language which is normal, at the place where the food is bought. Two alternative wordings exist in the German language.*

# Legislating for food safety and quality



to assess on the basis of objective criteria. The other is that the foodstuff should satisfy consumers' expectations in terms of taste or other subjective criteria. The European Union's approach to ensuring food quality reflects these two considerations.

## *Safety rules*

In terms of ensuring the safety aspects of food quality, the European Union has at its disposal a vast range of legislation which applies to foodstuffs, additives, vitamins, mineral salts and all substances which come into contact with food during the manufacturing process. There are 11 'regulations' or pieces of EU legislation concerning veterinary controls alone. The EU decides which products are authorised to be used in food production and whether these substances pose a risk to human health

*The diverse eating traditions across Europe can help to give consumers a large choice of food*

There are two aspects to food quality. One is that foodstuffs should be free of harmful or undesirable substances such as microbes, chemicals or other products used in the production process. This is relatively easy



if residues remain in foodstuffs. This list applies to substances such as veterinary medicines, pesticides, additives and pathogens.

It is the responsibility of the public authorities in each EU country to ensure that foodstuffs are free of banned substances. National authorities take regular samples of foodstuffs and subject them to laboratory testing. The EU's Food and Veterinary Office has the job of ensuring that Member States' controls are adequate. This point is explained more fully in the following section.

### *It should taste good*

When it comes to the quality of food products, in the sense that foodstuffs should possess specific attributes that consumers find desirable, the European Union operates a policy based on ensuring product diversity and reliability for consumers. In the past, the EU tried to agree on common definitions for the composition of certain basic foodstuffs including chocolate, sugar, honey and jams. However, because of the diverse traditions in the 15 Member States it proved very difficult to agree on a single definition to apply throughout the Union. Instead of trying to produce a single definition, the EU now operates under the principle of mutual recognition. This means that the Member States agree to recognise products from other countries even if they are produced slightly differently, provided that they meet certain basic criteria.

The EU also operates a labelling policy which informs consumers about where products have come from so that they can make their purchases based on personal preference. This

approach ensures maximum diversity of production in the EU and increases consumer choice.

A good example of this is Emmental cheese. Emmental, originally from Switzerland, is produced in several Member States but according to different recipes. Under EU legislation, a German cheesemaker can sell cheese, produced to a traditional recipe, as Emmental on the French market. French Emmental, however, may be produced using a slightly different method. The product label will indicate that the cheese has come from Germany, thereby informing the consumer that although French and German Emmental cheeses are similar, the German variety has been produced following German traditions. The consumer can therefore choose which cheese to buy according to personal preference.

### *Many goods are protected*

The European Union also lays down very strict rules for wine and spirits to ensure that products come from the areas indicated by the labels and that wines are produced according to established practices. Extensive rules also exist for beef.

There are other rules which benefit consumers indirectly. Under agricultural legislation, strict rules exist for fruit and vegetables to ensure that buyers can be sure of a certain quality and size of produce. Other agricultural products, like beef and cereals have to meet technical specifications in order to be eligible for the EU's system of public intervention. This ensures that farmers are not simply producing for intervention but that goods are of sufficient quality to be sold on the open market.



### *Traditional and regional specialities*

Since the early 1990s, the European Union has introduced a new set of measures which aim to give farmers better returns for high-quality products while providing better guarantees to consumers about the products they are eating. This initiative aims to improve the protection of products which come from a specific region in the Union or are produced according to traditional methods. The scheme operates using three marks of quality: protected designation of origin (PDO), protected geographical indication (PGI) and traditional speciality guaranteed (TSG). So far over 500 products have been registered under this programme. The list includes famous traditional products such as Scotch beef, Roquefort cheese, Serrano ham and a range of beers.

# Monitoring food safety controls: the EU Food and Veterinary Office

The European Union has built up a significant body of laws on food safety, animal health, animal welfare and plant health over the last decades. While the main responsibility of ensuring that these laws are respected rests with the 15 Member States, the European Commission shares responsibility by checking that Member States are doing their job properly. This is done through the Food and Veterinary Office (FVO) based in Dublin, Ireland. The FVO aims to ensure the highest standards of safety and quality throughout the food chain from stable to table, by monitoring all aspects of food production.



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The FVO's team of inspectors and experts carry out audits and spot-checks on food safety controls in the Member States, as well as in countries outside the EU which export food products into the Union. The number of inspectors has recently been increased to 100 to reflect the importance of the FVO's work.

Once the audits or inspection visits have been carried out, the Office draws up reports on all the establishments inspected. These are then given to the Member States to enable them to carry out improvements to tackle any shortcomings that the checks have revealed. If there are serious deficiencies, the FVO can perform repeated visits until the problems are resolved. The inspection reports are published on the European Commission's Internet site as soon as they are finalised ([europa.eu.int/comm/dg24](http://europa.eu.int/comm/dg24)).

## *Disease must not spread*

Animal health is one of the major areas of responsibility for the FVO. In case of an outbreak of an infectious disease in the EU, the Commission may introduce a ban on movements of animals from the affected Member State. In the case of BSE or 'mad cow' disease, the EU banned exports of live animals from the United Kingdom and Portugal to stop the disease spreading. The FVO will normally be called upon to carry out an urgent inspection to assess the situation on the ground and recommend additional measures.

The FVO is also responsible for issues such as the safety of foods of plant origin, particularly the monitoring of pesticide residues in fruit and vegetables, and ensuring that producers

*Extensive EU-rules ensure that inspectors check the food safety everywhere in Europe*

are meeting standards for organic production.

Over recent years, action taken on the basis of the Office's advice included a ban on imports of poultry from the United States because its food safety controls did not meet EU standards. Some EU Member States have also been taken to court by the Commission for failing to properly implement controls introduced in response to the BSE crisis. The FVO was also responsible for forcing another non-EU country to improve its monitoring of veterinary medicines and other contaminants in foodstuffs after inspectors discovered shortcomings in controls.

### *Independent scientific advice*

One of the most important means the European Union uses to create policies relating to foodstuffs is the reliance on independent scientific advice. If the Union is to take the appropriate decisions to protect public health, the advice has to be from the best experts in the field. It must also be totally impartial and free from political interference. To provide this advice, the EU has appointed nine scientific committees made up of 131 leading experts in a range of relevant fields to provide advice on all questions relating to food safety and animal and plant health. The work of the committees is co-ordinated through the Scientific Steering Committee, which can set up special committees at short notice to react to specific urgent problems.

### *Rapid alert when food safety is threatened*

One of the most effective tools the European Union has for ensuring food safety is the 'Rapid alert' system. Whenever there is an outbreak of an infectious animal disease or a food safety incident that threatens public health in a Member State, that country has to notify the Commission and all other Member States immediately. This allows the Commission to examine the situation as quickly as possible and to recommend appropriate emergency action such as stopping exports, halting the movement of animals in a Member State to stop the spread of disease, or ordering products to be removed from supermarket shelves. FVO inspectors carry out checks to ensure that the situation is under control before any safeguard measures can be lifted.

## *Decisions based on facts*

Nine committees of the best scientific experts from all over Europe provide the background for EU decisions on food safety.

Scientific Steering Committee

Scientific Committee on Food

Scientific Committee on Animal Nutrition

Scientific Committee on Animal Health and Animal Welfare

Scientific Committee on Veterinary Measures relating to Public Health

Scientific Committee on Plants

Scientific Committee on Cosmetic Products and Non-Food Products intended for Consumers

Scientific Committee on Medicinal Products and Medical Devices

Scientific Committee on Toxicity, Ecotoxicity and the Environment

The EU food safety system is under review in order to improve its work further, on the basis of a comprehensive proposal put forward by the Commission in January 2000.

# Helping consumers to choose healthy, safe food

In recent years, there have been a number of public health scares about food safety and growing concern about the quality of food. A survey of public opinion carried out by the European Commission in 1997 found that food safety was consumers' biggest concern.

These findings prompted the Commission to launch a campaign on consumer health and food safety. The main aims of the campaign, which was organised in two phases between 1998 and 1999, was to inform consumers about the basic aspects of food safety, to draw the public's attention to the role they must play in ensuring food safety, and to strengthen the role of consumer organisations as useful sources of advice to the public on food safety issues.

The campaign was carried out by different organisations in each of the 15 EU Member States to reflect the diversity of national traditions concerning food culture. It concentrated



on issues of food labelling, especially for food additives, traceability of foodstuffs and genetically modified organisms.

*Public information campaigns give advice on hygiene in the kitchen*





## *Keep the kitchen clean!*

Depending on the country, the organisations in charge of the campaign also provided advice on food hygiene, dealing with issues such as cleanliness in the kitchen, the correct temperature to store food, and cooking times and temperatures for certain types of meat. In some cases, information was also provided on existing food safety regulations or to encourage people to eat balanced meals. In Sweden, the initiative featured a little monster leading the way around a 'horror kitchen' to illustrate the hygiene risks in the home. The 'horror kitchen' was used in six million copies of a tray mat distributed in a fast-food chain, which enabled the campaign to reach its primary target, teenagers.

ing that certain foods, especially chicken and egg products, are cooked for a sufficient length of time.



Through the campaign, the EU wanted to stress to consumers the importance of national and EU authorities in guaranteeing food safety but also to emphasise that the public has a crucial role to play in ensuring food safety. All measures to keep food safe and healthy from the farm to the supermarket shelf are useless if consumers fail to observe basic hygiene rules like keeping raw and cooked food apart in the kitchen and ensur-

# Food quality and international trade

As one of the world's biggest importers and exporters of agricultural products, the European Union has a very strong interest in ensuring that international trade rules contribute to maintaining the high standards of food safety and quality that EU citizens have come to expect.

The EU is a member of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), which establishes guidelines for international trade. The Union is a very strong supporter of the WTO because it provides an essential framework for international trade to take place in a fair environment. There is a specific section of WTO legislation that deals with food safety and public health known as the Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS). This section allows a WTO member to take action to defend public health if there is scientific evidence that allowing a certain product onto its market would pose a risk to its citizens.

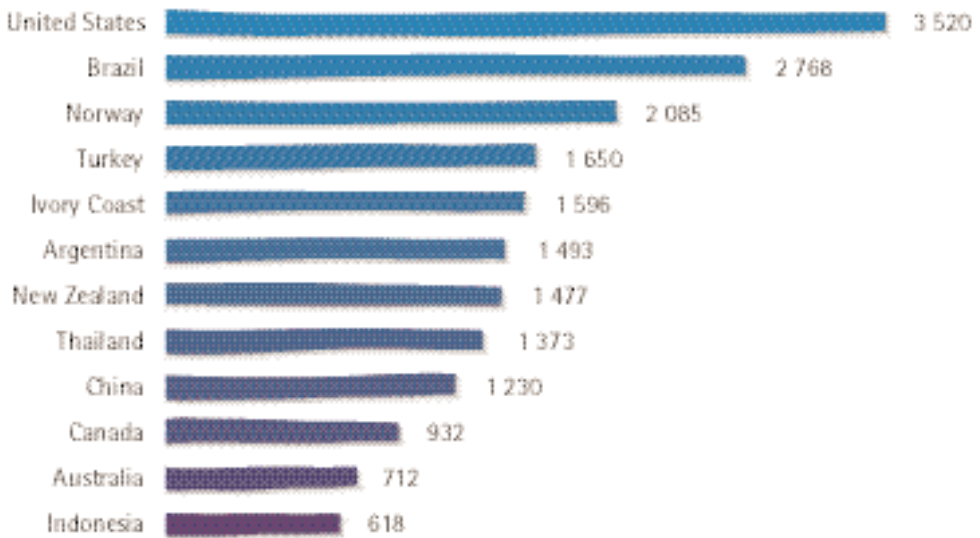
An example of how the WTO rules work is the dispute over certain growth-promoting hormones used in meat production. The EU decided to ban their use by farmers in EU countries and the import from third countries of meat from animals treated with hormones, because the residues they leave in meat and other foodstuffs of animal origin may be dangerous for consumers. The United States and Canada did not accept the EU's arguments for banning growth hormones and challenged the ban in

the WTO. The WTO said the European Union had not adequate scientific evidence to justify the ban. Until the EU produces this evidence and the question is settled, the WTO authorised the United States and Canada to impose sanctions on imports of EU goods equal in value to the sales the two countries have lost due to the ban.

During negotiations on new global trade agreements it continues to be a paramount objective for the EU to ensure that food safety and quality standards are maintained at the highest possible level. The EU also favours a WTO agreement on intellectual property rights which would protect designations of origin and geographical indications, and thereby facilitate the sale of particularly good quality food.

## *International organisations*

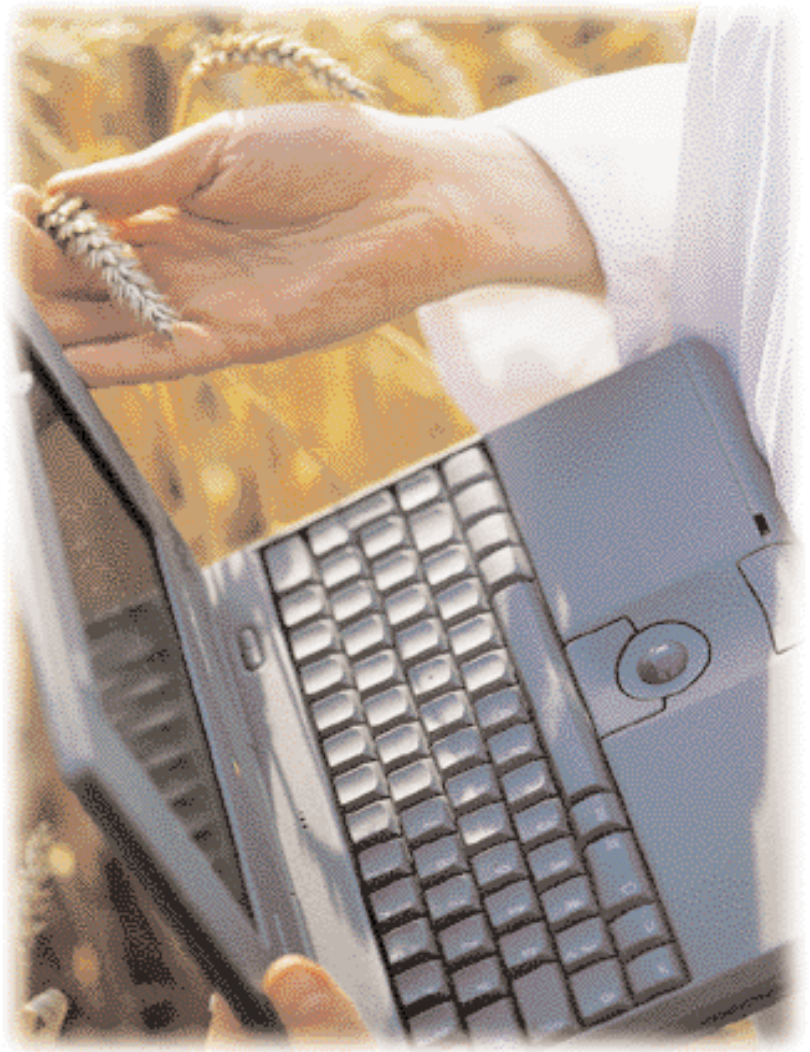
The EU and its Member States take part in other international organisations, which work to promote food quality and safety. The most important of these is the United Nations' Codex Alimentarius, based in Rome, which establishes common standards for foodstuffs around the world, in an attempt to improve consumer protection and facilitate fair trade. Organic farming, for instance, is one of the subjects being discussed in the Codex.



**EU food imports:** Every year, the European Union imports over 50 % of its food requirements. The EU also exports large quantities of food, so the overall net dependence on food import is about 15 %. The graph shows the main countries the EU imports food from (1998, value in million euro)

# Harnessing the potential of new technologies

*When it is under proper control, biotechnology can offer new opportunities to improve crops on the fields*



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Biotechnology, or the ability to manipulate the genetic structure of living organisms to improve certain characteristics, offers major opportunities for the future. The techniques can improve the productivity of crops by increasing the resistance to dam-

aging pests, and can improve the nutritional value of foods.

However, the general public has expressed a certain amount of caution about this new technology. That is why the European Union has put in

place a strict set of rules to ensure that these new foods are as safe as the traditional varieties that people have eaten without adverse effects for generations. The EU has also introduced strict labelling rules so that consumers are fully informed about which foodstuffs contain ingredients produced using biotechnology.

### *Detailed control in advance*

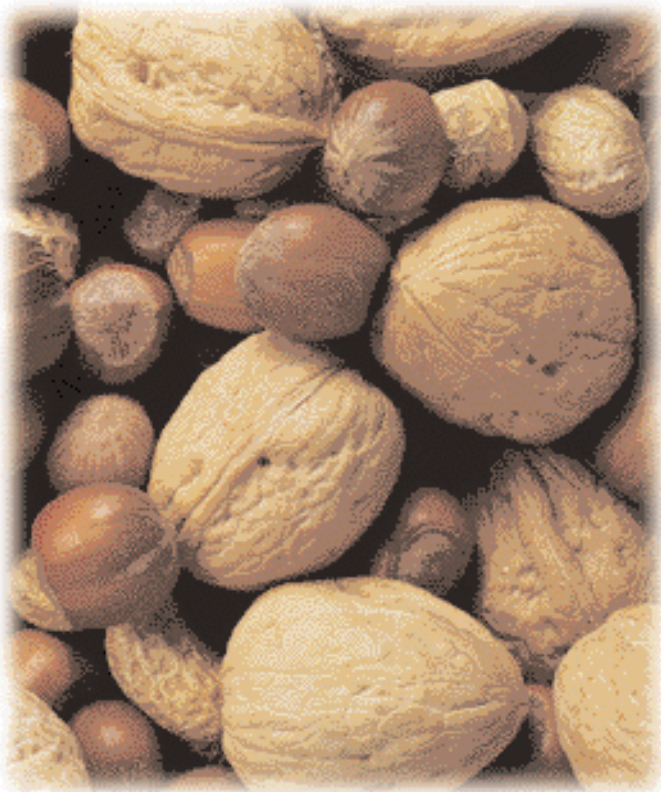
Before new biotech products can be sold for human consumption, the makers of the products have to submit detailed dossiers on the products, so that EU regulators can establish whether there is any risk to public health. In the case of such foodstuffs, known as novel foods in EU terminology, each application has to be assessed by a special scientific committee, made up of independent scientific experts who give advice on whether a foodstuff is safe for consumption. The committee's recommendations are then considered by the Standing Committee for Foodstuffs, made up of civil servants from each of the 15 EU Member States. If Member States have concerns that new foodstuffs may pose some risk, they can raise these concerns and possibly block authorisation of a new product.

In order to provide consumers with maximum information about foodstuffs and whether they contain genetically modified organisms (GMOs), the European Union has agreed on strict labelling guidelines. Products containing or consisting of GMOs have to be labelled. Products derived from a GMO have to be labelled if the characteristics of the food or food ingredient are different in comparison with a conventional food or food ingredient. The presence

of DNA or protein derived from a genetic modification may serve as an indication of such a difference. If products are GMO-free, the producers can write so on the label.

In an attempt to solve the problem of producers who have tried to keep their food products free of GMO material but have not been able to prevent accidental mixing with authorised GMO material, the EU has set a threshold which allows such products not to be labelled if the accidental contamination does not exceed 1 %.

# Using science to improve food safety and quality: research and development



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*Many people are allergic to nuts – European research tries to discover the secrets behind*

Monitoring food safety standards is not the only way the European Union works to improve the quality of food. Under the Union's 14.96 billion euro research and development (R & D) programme, the EU funds science projects aimed at improving the nutritional value and health benefits of food, as well as acknowledging the objective characteristics of traditional foodstuffs. Over the last 10 years, EU-funded research into food production, food safety and health and nutrition has been a very successful part of the R & D programme. Food

research, which is part of the Union's FAIR programme, has been one of the most popular areas in terms of requests for funding and the high quality of research proposals. The research has helped EU scientists achieve a better level of understanding of the role of food in improving the general health and well-being of the European consumer.

Some of the successful food research projects include work into improving the nutritional value of foods, allergic reactions to certain substances and factors influencing obesity levels. Studies have also improved understanding of how food can be contaminated and have contributed to developing faster methods of detecting harmful substances in food. Because food and diet have a major influence on human health and well-being, research projects have also focused on designing special or tailored foodstuffs which offer specific health and nutritional benefits for certain sectors of the population.

## *Reducing the risk of cancer*

Eating vegetables of the brassica family, which includes cabbage, broccoli and sprouts, can help reduce the risk of cancer in humans but the reasons for this are not entirely understood. A research project coordinated by the Institute of Food Research in Norwich, United Kingdom, has been examining the chemical processes by which these vegetables can contribute to reduc-

ing cancer risk. The results of the study will be used to develop vegetables which offer higher levels of the beneficial element.

### *Chasing food allergy*

Increasing numbers of consumers have adverse reactions to certain foods such as nuts and celery. Nevertheless, methods of detecting food allergies are not completely reliable. A project managed by the Department of Allergology and

Immunology in Milan, Italy, is working to identify some of the major substances in certain foods which provoke allergies and to improve diagnostic methods. The results of this work will help doctors to diagnose patients' allergic reactions more accurately. Consumers will benefit from better testing methods because they will know which foods they are allergic to and be able to avoid them. The research will also help the food industry to develop foods which do not provoke an allergic reaction.

## *Further reading*

Further details about the EU quality labels on food can be seen at  
[europa.eu.int/comm/dg06/qual/en/index\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu.int/comm/dg06/qual/en/index_en.htm)

Information about consumer policy and the full inspection reports on food safety by the EU Food and Veterinary Office:  
[europa.eu.int/comm/dg24](http://europa.eu.int/comm/dg24)

Detailed information on questions related to the EU commercial policy towards the rest of the world:  
[europa.eu.int/comm/trade](http://europa.eu.int/comm/trade)

Information about EU research policy:  
[europa.eu.int/comm/research](http://europa.eu.int/comm/research)

The European Commission has published various free information publications about subjects dealt with in this brochure. See the catalogue on the Internet at  
[europa.eu.int/comm/dg10/publications](http://europa.eu.int/comm/dg10/publications)



European Commission

**Healthy food for Europe's citizens  
The European Union and food quality**

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The quality of the food we eat has become one of the biggest concerns for Europe's citizens. This brochure explains the role of the European Union (EU) in maintaining the highest standards of food safety and quality.

The EU agricultural policy encourages farmers to produce a large choice of quality foodstuff, including organic production. European-wide legislation serves to keep food free of harmful substances and to keep consumers well informed through the labels on the food. The EU Food and Veterinary Office monitors whether safety rules are followed. Also, the EU activities related to new technology and to the global trade rules have an impact on our daily food.

## Other information on the European Union

Information in all the official languages of the European Union is available on the Internet. It can be accessed through the Europa server (<http://europa.eu.int>).

Information and publications in English on the European Union can be obtained from:

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