



FOOD: PUTTING CONSUMERS FIRST

Food issues are high on the European agenda. Citizens expect their food to be safe and wholesome, and they want to be fully informed so as to be able to take decisions on what they eat on a solid basis.

We have been busy with quite a few pieces of legislation related to food over the past few years including a law on food information to consumers, new rules on food for babies and infants and for medicinal purposes, and legislation on food additives, flavourings and enzymes.

Better food information for consumers

The Commission presented a draft law on **food information to consumers** in 2008 which seeks to modernise, simplify and clarify food labelling within the European Union. The overall aim of S&D was to find ways to inform consumers in the best possible manner about the composition and energy content of the food they buy and help them with their food choices.

The main issues for S&D were:

- country of origin labelling
- front of pack labelling of energy plus fat, saturated fats, sugar and salt content
- labelling of transfats
- labelling of palm oil

Our Group put a lot of effort into strengthening the proposal against the EPP rapporteur's intentions to put the interest of food industry first.

In the negotiations with the Council we achieved a lot for consumers:

- labels will be more easily legible due to minimum font size
- mandatory country of origin labelling for meat (pig, poultry, sheep, goat). Moreover, the Commission is assessing the impact of extending country of origin labelling to meat and fish in processed food, and other products.
- mandatory information on allergens, nanomaterials, use of palm oil
- Commission has to work on a solution for transfats (ban or mandatory labelling)
- voluntary front of pack labelling

The law also contains strong provisions on fair information practices to prevent consumers from being misled, including rules on food imitates as well as meat and fish products consisting of combined parts.

In dealing with these proposals, the principal concern of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament has always been to strengthen consumer protection, paying special attention to vulnerable groups such as people suffering from allergies, to increase transparency

to enable consumers to make informed choices and to ban practices misleading consumers. Additives should also bring advantages and benefits for consumers.

A battle won on additives

In July 2008, a legislative package of four **regulations on food additives, flavourings and enzymes** was adopted by the European Parliament. The new regulations will ensure better health and consumer protection and will also assist the free movement of food within the EU. The aim of the proposal was to simplify, update and bring in line existing legislation with the latest scientific findings.

The first regulation laid down an EU-level authorisation procedure for additives, enzymes and flavourings, based on a transparent and scientific evaluation by the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA). This applied immediately to all new additives etc, while over 300 existing additives and 2600 flavourings already in use will gradually also be checked for their health impact.

The other three regulations fill in the detail, providing for lists of authorised products, conditions of use and rules on labelling. For flavourings, maximum levels for undesirable substances will be set.

What Socialists and Democrats have achieved:

- labelling for food containing colours ("azo-dyes") that pose a risk to children's health
- the precautionary principle will guide approval of additives
- people suffering from allergies and other vulnerable groups will get special attention
- environmental concerns must be taken into account
- new authorisation and safety assessment is needed when nanotechnology is used

Food additives are completely banned in unprocessed food and stricter conditions are introduced on using the term "natural" to describe flavourings.

Stronger rules special food

One of the aims of revising the legislation on special food including baby food was to prevent its use by some food operators as a way of by-passing existing EU legislation, such as the law on health claims. Companies were marketing a broad range of foods as dietetic foods and making claims about their suitability without having those claims assessed based on strict criteria. Abolishing the broad concept of dietetic foods and replacing it instead with clearly defined categories of foods will help to close this loophole.

Under the agreement, the scope of the new legislation will be restricted to:

- Infant formula and follow-on formula
- Baby foods
- Foods for special medical purposes
- Total diet replacements for weight control.

The guiding principle for S&D was to provide consumers with clear and transparent information and to protect them from being misled by claims without a proper scientific basis.