

Getting the most out of EU-quality food and drink: Commission launches a consultation on agricultural product quality

The European Commission today adopted a Green Paper to open the debate on how to help European farmers make the most of the quality of the food and drinks they produce. As globalisation spreads, pressure increases from low cost products from overseas and consumer demands evolve, Europe's most potent weapon is 'quality'. The Green Paper looks at the range of standards, quality and certification programmes and labelling schemes currently operating in the EU – including geographical indications, organic farming, and private and regional food quality certification schemes – and asks what could be done better to exploit the strengths of EU farming and better inform consumers about the products on offer. The paper asks stakeholders to give their views on how effective these measures are in delivering guarantees and communicating the qualities of the products, and to suggest improvements. The consultation period will run until the end of 2008. A Communication will be prepared next year based on the results, which could lead to legislative proposals at a later stage.

"In an increasingly competitive world, European farmers need to play to their major strength – quality," said Mariann Fischer Boel, Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development. "To do this, EU farmers have to provide products with the qualities consumers want, guarantee these qualities and, perhaps most importantly, communicate them effectively. We have a whole range of policy instruments and specific quality schemes in the EU. I want to know from the people involved whether these measures work properly and what more, if anything, needs to be done."

Health Commissioner Androulla Vassiliou said: "I am very pleased to be associated with the launching of this Green paper on food quality which will give the opportunity to our citizens to provide their input on what they expect from us so to be assured on the quality of their food. The Green Paper will also give us input on how we can build further on communicating food quality which we have already achieved through our existing legislation which ensures that EU food is produced with very high standards of food safety, including animal health and welfare or our hygiene regulations."

For the farmer, quality means delivering products with the right characteristics (such as percentage of lean meat) and with the right farming attributes (such as specific animal welfare methods). And it concerns everything from commodities produced to baseline standards to high-value-added products made using exacting production methods.

At the same time, products from emerging countries with low production costs are putting greater pressure on EU farmers — at home and in 3rd countries. This process has been advanced by globalisation, trade agreements, freer markets, and lowering border protection. EU farmers have to meet this challenge head-on. They already follow some of the most exacting farming requirements in the world and have the savoir-faire to deliver the product qualities demanded by the market. That is why the Commission is convinced that instead of seeing these demands as a burden, EU farmers have a real opportunity to turn them to their advantage – by delivering exactly what consumers want, clearly distinguishing their products in the marketplace, and gaining premiums in return.

The Green Paper is divided into three sections, dealing with: baseline production requirements and marketing standards; specific EU quality schemes such as geographical indications, traditional specialities and organic farming; and food quality certification schemes.

The Green Paper raises issues such as:

- Whether there should be an obligatory indication of the place of farming of primary products (EU/non-EU).
- Should products allowed to be sold which do not meet marketing standards for aesthetic reasons?
- Should there be EU rules to define terms like 'mountain product' or 'farmhouse product'?
- How should the scheme for geographical indications (GIs) be developed?
- How can GIs be protected more effectively in third countries?
- How can the single EU market in organic products be made to work better?
- How can we increase the production of quality products in the EU's outermost regions?
- Are any new EU schemes needed, particularly in the area of environmental protection, and if so, how do we keep the administrative burden as light as possible?
- How can we avoid the risk of consumers being misled by certification schemes?

For more information and to contribute to the consultation:
http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/quality/policy/index_en.htm