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Food Safety: 35 years protecting human and animal health

Europe is more than ever reliant on its Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed (RASFF) to ensure that our food meets some of the highest food safety standards in the world. Besides its main role of ensuring food safety since its creation 35 years ago, a 2013 annual report RASFF shows that it is a crucial tool to trace back and withdraw products where fraud was detected.

EU Commissioner for Health, Tonio Borg said: *"RASFF is a vital tool to respond to food safety risks in Europe, since information is swiftly exchanged to protect European consumers. The horsemeat scandal illustrated the RASFF system in action and food products adulterated with horsemeat were traced back to source and withdrawn from the market".* To conclude: *"Today we get closer to European consumers through an innovative on-line tool - the new [RASFF consumers' portal](#) - giving them access to information about recall notices and public warnings by public health authorities and business operators in a given EU country".*

Overall results

Today's annual report covers the reporting period 2013, where a total of 3 205 original notifications were transmitted through the RASFF, of which 596 were classified as an alert, 442 as information for follow-up, 705 as information for attention and 1 462 as border rejection notification. These original notifications gave rise to 5 158 follow-up notifications, representing on average about 1.6 follow-ups per original notification. Follow-up notifications can lead to a series of actions for example: recall, withdrawal, seizure and destruction of food products. The overall number of notifications transmitted through RASFF in 2013 compared to 2012 decreased by 9%.

Some of the most notable issues were food-borne outbreaks due to the presence of hepatitis A virus found in berry mixes and strawberries, adverse reactions caused by food supplements with potentially dangerous ingredients, shigatoxin-producing E.coli (STEC) in meat and pesticides residues on plant products.

Origin of the notifications

Of the 3 205 original notifications transmitted in RASFF in 2013, the vast majority (2 710, 84.6%) concerned food, 272 concerned feed (8.5%) and 223 notifications concerned food contact materials (6.9%).

Other issues: action against food fraud

Although no food safety risk was identified, the RASFF system proved instrumental in ensuring that all information related to food products adulterated with horsemeat was swiftly shared. In the first semester of 2013, and beyond, this helped EU Member States to speed up their investigations and build a more comprehensive picture allowing them to trace back to the source of the fraud.

Next steps

Indications suggest there is an increasing need to exchange information on cross-border cases of food fraud which are becoming increasingly sophisticated.

The Commission is developing a food fraud IT system, inspired by RASFF that will underpin the work of the recently created EU Food Fraud Network. This IT system will provide a platform for cross-border administrative cooperation between national authorities to swiftly exchange information on deceptive and fraudulent activities in the food sector to pursue them across borders.

Background

Launched 35 years ago, RASFF as a network that facilitates the cross-border flow of information between its members and plays a key role in ensuring a high level of food safety for Europe's citizens has come a long way from its humble beginnings.

The RASFF network allows for a swift exchange of information between Member States and the Commission when risks to public health are detected in the food and feed chain. All Members of the RASFF (EU-28, Commission, EFSA, ESA, Norway, Liechtenstein, Iceland and Switzerland) have a round-the-clock service to ensure that urgent notifications are sent, received and responded to collectively and efficiently. Thanks to RASFF, many food safety risks had been averted before they could have been harmful to European consumers.

For more information:

More information on RASFF:

http://ec.europa.eu/food/safety/rasff/index_en.htm

Latest RASFF report and visual materials:

http://ec.europa.eu/food/safety/rasff/reports_publications/index_en.htm

RASFF consumers portal:

http://ec.europa.eu/food/safety/rasff/for_consumers/index_en.htm

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