

The role of primary producers in implementing nutrition policy

Presentation on behalf of COPA-COGECA

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Introduction

Thank you very much for the invitation to present the views of European farmers and their co-operatives on their role in implementing nutrition policy.

I am here mainly to listen and to learn on this relatively new issue at EU level and a new policy issue for primary producers. Nutrition policy is a complex and sometimes controversial issue and non-experts like us rely on respected scientific organisations to advise us in this area. It has even been suggested that farmers take more of an interest in the nutrition of their animals than in their own diet.

The primary objective of European farmers and their co-operatives is to supply consumers with products that are safe, wholesome and of good quality. We are committed to continuing to contribute substantially to the quality of life and health of consumers. We are willing to respond to the wishes of European society to preserve and develop, in a sustainable way, our European agriculture and food heritage in all its diversity.

Nobody can contest that availability of food has increased over the past decades and that food has never been so cheap as today since the official figures tell us that costs for food are some 17% of total expenses of households in the EU [check for more current figures?]. But the pattern of food consumption is also changing, people have less time to prepare and cook food, are buying more processed foods or ready meals and eating outside the home more often. In addition, eating habits vary across Europe and this variation of different dishes and menus is just part of our "European culture". With enlargement we can look forward to an even greater diversity.

Information to consumers on nutrition is a very positive issue. We support this and recognise that producers have both a responsibility and an opportunity, along with the rest of the food chain, to provide accurate and meaningful information about their products and the role that they could play as part of a balanced diet. Farming organisations, through partnerships with professional nutritionists, are playing an increasing role in providing educational resources to schools and health workers, alongside generic promotional campaigns.

It is also important to stress that factors other than food may have an impact on an individual's health: physical activity and lifestyle play a significant role and the relationship between these factors also complex and unique to each individual.

To understand the role of producers it is important to consider the relation between nutrition and the Common Agricultural Policy. Was the old Common Agricultural Policy bad for public health? Will the new CAP be better?

Farmers are often seen as "primary producers" producing mainly raw materials, which food manufacturers do the important part by further processing into food.

The Common Agricultural Policy, created in 1958, has changed substantially through its reforms in 1992, 1999 and June 2003. Progressively, support prices have been reduced, payments are being decoupled from production and wider considerations such as animal welfare, environment, and food quality are coming to the forefront.

Taken together, these reforms amount to a major change in direction for our agricultural policy. The new focus is now on the multifunctional nature of agriculture rather than simply a focus on food production. Improving access to wholesome nutritious food was and is an important role of European farmers. But quality is now recognised as being important alongside quantity.

This new approach is much more in tune with the realities of modern food production and increasing sophistication of consumers.

- The quality of raw ingredients produced by the farmer is paramount to the quality of the final product. Research and development is important to drive understanding and improvements in this area, including the nutritional value, and farmers and their research levy boards recognise their role in this area [Examples? french grain, anti-cancer broccoli and tomatoes, omega-3 fatty acid content in dairy products, chips that absorb less oil during cooking]
- Diversification of farmer-owned businesses into food processing and policies to encourage more fresh fruit and vegetable consumption lead to a shortening of the food chain and a more direct connection with the consumer.

We are keen to play our part and work with Governments, whether national or European, on initiatives to improve public health. For example, farmers in the UK play a crucial role in the success of schemes to increase fruit and vegetable consumption to at least 5-a-day. By 2004, the National School Fruit Scheme will be providing a free piece of fruit or vegetable to 2.5 million 4-6 year olds each day of the school year.

This conference is an excellent opportunity to discuss the prospects for a broader health, food and social policy to be defined at EU level. There is a particular need to identify an EU level strategy with which *all parts of the food chain* can engage.

The burden of regulation on the production chain is a factor. There is a need for balance to ensure that food safety, environmental and animal welfare objectives can be met but with sufficient flexibility traditional methods of food production are not wiped out and farmers can raise standards and pursue new markets based on the nutritional value of their product.

The farmer and farming co-operatives relationship in the food chain is also important. Does the food chain transfer market incentives for improvements in product quality to farm-level, or does the farmer expect any returns from his efforts towards improved quality as likely to be gobbled up by larger players downstream in the chain?

Conclusions

- A major part of our role is to facilitate access and respond to market demands. Food chain relationships may need to change to encourage innovation and raise standards.
- Industry can influence consumers' buying habits – we have a responsibility to educate and inform but also to base communication on sound science, while leaving room for individual preferences and choice.
- R&D to explore how nutritional composition is linked with production. For example EU support for research into the links between soil fertility and nutritional quality would be welcome.
- We can't work alone, we need to seek partnerships – within the farming community, with Government, with nutrition scientists, with other stakeholders in the food chain, and with consumer groups – in order to play an effective role in improving nutrition and health within Europe.

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