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PREVENTION AND REDUCTION OF MICROBIOLOGICAL CONTAMINATION – CONSIDERATION THROUGHOUT THE FOOD CHAIN

Pathogenic microorganisms and their toxins are a major cause of food borne illnesses in humans. Therefore a large part of the Community food legislation is targeted to prevent and control these microbiological risks.

Community legislation provides for a comprehensive approach to food safety. This ‘farm to fork’ approach covers the whole food chain, starting from primary production right up to the distribution and marketing of products. This legal framework forms a sound basis for the prevention of microbiological risks in foodstuffs, especially when several control measures are needed along the whole food chain to control these kind of risks.

As live animals form an important source of many food-borne pathogens, the reduction of the prevalence of these pathogens in animal populations is often an effective means to improve food safety. At Community level, the zoonoses legislation already obliges Member States to control certain salmonellas in breeding flocks of poultry. The proposed new legislation in this field would extend these controls to cover also other animal populations and possibly also other food-borne zoonoses. The intention is to set Community targets for reduction of pathogens in animal populations.

The processing, handling and distribution of foodstuffs are covered by detailed hygiene rules laid down in 15 general and specific Community directives. In addition these directives oblige food businesses to establish own checks and HACCP procedures in order to prevent and control risks linked to their products. Some of these directives also contain microbiological criteria, which are set to guide the food businesses in their hygiene controls and as an indication of acceptability of the products. This set of Community directives is currently under revision, and the proposed harmonised rules will further strengthen the application of HACCP principles together with the guides to good practice. These proposed new rules would also cover the whole primary production.

A recent important development in the Community legislation is the adoption of a Regulation laying down principles of food law and establishing European Food Safety Authority. This regulation sets a high level of consumer health protection as an objective for food legislation. The regulation provides for harmonised rules for the control of food and feed safety. It includes a number of fundamental principles, such as the use of risk analysis, the precautionary principle and the application of traceability. The regulation also clearly gives the responsibility of food safety to food businesses. The establishment of the European Food Safety Authority shall reinforce the scientific and technical support in relation to food safety in the Community.