

Breaking News on Food Safety & Quality Control

Previous page : [Reports criticise Italy, Greece for poor food safety regs](#)

Reports criticise Italy, Greece for poor food safety regs

By Charlotte Eyre

31/07/2007- **Italy is in the bad books, while Slovenia is the teacher's pet, according to European Commission's latest reports on the state of EU member states food safety regulations.**

The EU food safety requirements were devised with the aim of having similar standards across the bloc, a harmonisation meant to reduce internal trade barriers.

However, some countries, especially those that have just joined the EU, have shown much more commitment to the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) requirements, and other requirements of the General Food Law, than others.

While countries such as the UK and Slovenia have complied with HACCP requirements, others, such as Italy and Greece, have not.

The evaluations of the state of each individual country's system were completed last year. Over the past month the European Commission has been releasing the reports. Here is a synopsis of the reports on some of the main food and drink manufacturing countries.

UK standards improve under HACCP

Inspectors from the EU's Food and Veterinary Office noted that all of the plants they visited in the UK have HACCP-based procedures in place. Also, plant managers have generally corrected any problems that the inspectors had pointed out on previous visits, especially concerning the safety of milk and milk-based products.

There have been significant improvements in standards at dairies and milk-processing plants, the inspectors said, and several establishments have been re-approved under the new hygiene regulation, the report stated.

Food producers in the UK are also more careful with animal by-products the inspectors said, although the relevant authorities still don't communicate properly over the health status of animals on farms.

Slovenia and Slovakia

Despite only recently entering the EU, officials from these Eastern European countries are highly praised for their implementation of the new legislation.

There is a good exchange of information between the authorities and plant managers, and food producers have a clear idea of corporate responsibility, the inspectors said.

The inspectors noted some deficiencies in the implementation of meat labelling rules, and control of the identification mark, but they said that all food operators have an HACCP-based system in place.

France takes steps to implement legislation

The French authority has taken various steps in order to implement the new EU legislation, according to the report. The inspectors described the development of a new system, the prioritisation of controls and the harmonisation of inspection as "*positive points*".

However, they also claimed that the penalty system in France for breaking food safety laws is too lenient and "*a cause for concern*", especially in relation to the meat industry.

Germany provides limited information

The report noted that the German Federal Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Consumer Protection (BMVEL) has only just started to develop a control system in the framework of the new EU hygiene legislation, making analysis difficult.

Most official safety controls are therefore based on earlier systems, and harmonisation across the country is impossible, the report said.

The lack of organisation also meant that the FVO inspectors had little official data.

They criticised the relevant German authorities for providing limited information, and claimed that the authenticity and accuracy of official certification is sometimes dubious.

Italy and Greece damned for lax system

Out of all the EU countries, the report was most damning of Italy and Greece, where it said there are still little or no HACCP regulations in place.

In Italy, some regions are in the process of formulating procedures to get in line with new regulations, inspectors said, but training programmes are scarce.

Factories and plants in all regions don't comply with regulations in regards to the post-mortem examination of animals, safety checks on raw milk and general operation practices, they added.

The inspectors also disclosed an occurrence of potential fraud in relation to the freezing beef that is re-packed and re-labelled with a new extended shelf life date, although they did not describe the case in their report.

As in Italy, FVO inspectors criticised the Greek authorities for their lack of compliance with the new legislation, which they attributed to *"delayed national implementing measures and the slow development of regional administrative structures."*

Hygiene conditions are consequently variable in Greece, they said, with the conditions at milk and meat product establishments better than at slaughterhouses and cutting plants.

Most worryingly, the inspectors concluded that post-mortem inspection of animals showed that meat bearing a "safe to eat" mark was potentially harmful to human health.

HACCP is an international standard for assessing food safety risks in manufacturing plants, designed to enable plant managers to spot physical, chemical and biological hazards during the manufacturing process, rather than at final product inspection.

In compliance with EU law, business operators have to use HACCP to identify hazards, establish critical limits, implement monitoring procedures, establish corrective action and procedures to verify that measures are working effectively, and keep records.

In 2006, the European Commission set up the Better Training for Safer Food programme to ensure that national authorities are up-to-date with all aspects of EU food safety law.

The Commission estimates that in the long term, the training programme will require an annual budget of around €15 million, and will include delegates from outside, as well as inside, the EU.

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