



The Consumer Voice in Europe

BEUC statement on Food & TTIP

BEUC Statement delivered at the TTIP Stakeholder Presentation
Event

Brussels, 16th July 2014

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Ref.: BEUC-X-2014-054 - 16/07/2014

First of all, I would like to thank the European Commission for giving us this second opportunity to present the consumer view on food and TTIP in front of the EU and US negotiators.

TTIP, as we know, is set to cover traditional market access aspects but – and this is what makes it more than a trade agreement – it will also focus on **regulatory issues and non-tariff barriers** with a view to making both regulatory systems more compatible. In the fields of food safety and labelling, in particular, the US and the EU have implemented different policies; therefore it is important for European consumers to understand **if and how TTIP will impact on existing EU food safety and quality standards**.

At the last stakeholder event, we stressed the need for any trade deal to preserve the **precautionary principle**, which is a fundamental part of food risk management in the EU to guarantee the highest level of consumer protection, while the US approach to food risk analysis tends to be more a cost-benefit one. We also insisted that TTIP should uphold the consideration of **other legitimate factors** than science in food policy making, such as ethics, animal welfare, societal and environmental factors or even consumer expectations. Indeed not only consumers should be able to enjoy food that is **safe** but they also have the right to know **how** it was produced. In particular, EU consumers' lack of appetite for food produced according to certain techniques such as GM or cloning must be heard and respected.

Today I would like to elaborate on another important difference between the EU and US food systems, namely **the ways both regions seek to ensure the safety of food, and especially meat**. While the US tends to regulate the safety of the end product – hence is more prone to resorting to end-of-chain solutions such as meat decontamination treatments –, the EU has opted for an integrated approach to food hygiene and safety all along the production chain. The philosophy of the “**farm to fork**” approach, as it is called, is essentially based on the wise proverb that prevention is better than cure. Concretely, it requires a series of preventive actions and control measures to be taken across the chain to ensure that food sold to consumers ultimately is safe. In the case of meat, this translates as preventing animals from getting infected with food-poisoning bacteria during all stages of rearing and slaughter rather than washing meat with antimicrobials at the end of the processing line.

It is not without reason that **chlorinated chicken** has emerged as a symbol of the detriments European consumers might face if a TTIP deal is signed that does not have consumers' interests at heart. Chlorinated chicken has to do first of all with **consumer preferences**: research conducted in the UK, Denmark and Finland consistently found that European consumers' acceptance of meat that has been treated with chemicals is low. This is by contrast to other treatments – such as steam or rapid surface chilling – for which consumer acceptance is greater. From our perspective, it is vital that EU consumers' preference for meat that has not been rinsed with any chemicals is **recognised and respected**.

The other reason why we believe the EU should neither approve poultry washes – such as chlorine or peroxyacetic acid – nor permit the importation of chicken meat rinsed with antimicrobials is that it would open the door to shifting away from the farm to fork approach. But why do we think this is an issue? After all, can't both strategies be seen as equivalent as long as they allow producing meat that won't contaminate consumers with harmful bacteria?

Our response is clearly no, both approaches are **not equivalent**. As recognised by EFSA, the European Food Safety Authority, fighting bacteria at each step of animal farming is more efficient as it aims at **preventing contamination via all possible transmission pathways**. Let's just take the example of the food-poisoning bacteria *Campylobacter*: actually most of the human cases of the disease caused by these bacteria are not linked to the preparation and consumption of contaminated chicken meat itself. Rather, they may be attributed to the live chicken "reservoir" – although the transmission mode is not fully understood yet. This is why we believe the **European approach to meat safety is more efficient in protecting public health**.

Attempts have been made to present meat washes as an "extra safety net" but we very much doubt so. Not only is proof of their efficacy equivocal but we also see the risk these treatments will be seen as the "easy fix" to make up for poor farming and slaughter hygiene. We believe instead that stricter enforcement of current hygiene rules to boost compliance should be favoured over techniques EU consumers reject.

The good news is that chlorinated chicken (or chicken rinsed with any other chemical) is not on TTIP's menu, as we have been told. So why aren't we fully convinced by these reassurances? Perhaps because contradicting statements have been made which show it is clearly on the radar. And perhaps because just like lactic acid rinses on beef, poultry washes approval by the EU could just be one of these "**confidence building**" steps in a bid to secure a trade deal.

While trade is a legitimate interest to take into account in setting food safety standards, it cannot be the determining factor. **Public health and consumer protection must come first and should be at the heart of TTIP** as it comes to food and agriculture issues. At the end of the day, BEUC remains convinced that the success of the TTIP trade deal will be measured by the value it can bring to American and European consumers.

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