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EU Parliament upgrades novel food laws

A strong signal has been sent by MEPs that EU laws on 'novel foods' (foodstuffs produced since 1997 such as lab produced meat and 'cholesterol lowering' margarine) must change to tackle the rapid pace of food innovation and adequately protect consumers.

The Environment & Food Safety Committee (ENVI) voted to pass its Report on the European Commission's proposed Novel Foods regulation. Published in December 2013, the principal aim is to centralise authorisation of novel foods.

MEPs acted in the interests of consumers by:

- Prohibiting nanotechnology in food pending development of adequate safety test methods. They also backed a robust definition of 'nanomaterial' based on the European Food Safety Agency (EFSA)'s recommendation of a 10% nanoparticle threshold for an ingredient to qualify as 'nano'.
- Strongly stressing the 'precautionary principle' i.e. foods must prove their safety for approval;
- Calling for clear guidance from EFSA on the data needed to prove a 'history of safe use' for traditional food imported from third countries (e.g. insects).

Monique Goyens, BEUC's Director General, reacted:

"We are thrilled consumer protection was put at the forefront in assessing novel foods. It is a wise move to say nano should not be used in food until its safety risks can be fully assessed. The only box unticked by MEPs was EFSA's opinion being systematically sought on any novel food application.

"To reflect the reality of food produced today, it was crucial for the Parliament to update the list of novel foods such as lab-produced meat. To keep better pace with rapid technological changes, the list could and should have been kept open to future novel foodstuffs.

"The mere fact a food such as insects has been consumed in a country for many years should not lead to an assumption on its safety. We are glad EFSA's help is being sought to determine histories of safe use of foodstuffs traditionally eaten outside the EU.

"This time last year, we were dismayed by the Commission's proposal on food from animal clones. It denied consumers the right to know what they purchase and eat by withholding labelling requirements for food from clones' descendants. This is despite 83% of consumers wanting such labelling if on EU supermarket shelves.

“Our concerns have been reflected by MEPs who are calling on the Commission to go back to the drawing board. We expect a revamped cloning proposal, this time in line with consumers’ expectations.”

ENDS

¹ Draft report by MEP James Nicholson

http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2014_2019/documents/envi/pr/1036/1036384/1036384en.pdf

² The Commission proposal only makes it compulsory to consult EFSA if a candidate novel food is liable to have effects on health. However, this can only be determined after food safety risk evaluation.

³ Proposal for a Directive on the placing on the market of food from animal clones.