

## **Food Quality schemes: high animal welfare through voluntary standards**

### Introduction

Consumers and citizens are increasingly concerned about the way their food is produced and in particular about the way farm animals are reared, transported and slaughtered.

The 2005 Eurobarometer confirms that in all the (25) Member States of the EU, consumers are concerned and ready to pay more for high-welfare products.

Although the EU has basic legal standards for certain farm animals, many areas of livestock farming are still unregulated and even where standards exist they are often not strict enough to ensure acceptable welfare levels.

Eurogroup for Animals considers **that the market for high animal welfare products is underdeveloped and holds opportunities** for farmers, retailers and the whole EU food industry;

- it constitutes a competitive advantage in comparison with cheap standard products
- it is what the consumers and citizens expect
- it leads to robust and unstressed, healthier animals
- it is beneficial for the farming community and rural livelihoods

Several recent EU policies promote quality schemes or quality, sustainable, production which delivers high levels of environmental and animal protection. These include; the revised CAP Rural development measures, the Community Action Plan on the Protection and Welfare of Animals and the EU Sustainable Development Strategy (June 2006 – sustainable production and consumption, high level of animal welfare and health standards).

Eurogroup believes that **Quality Assurance schemes can never replace legal standards but they can, in addition, contribute greatly to the improvement of animal welfare** and represent a business opportunity. In the UK, Freedom Food, an animal welfare based assurance scheme with 2,000 farmers and standards in 8 different sectors, is a good example of how high animal welfare can deliver welfare and business benefits with an ever growing membership and increase in sales. In the case of broilers the sales increased from 6.5 million to 17 million in 2006.

However there is already a wide range of voluntary schemes on the market and in the absence of an EU legal framework with baseline criteria for these schemes, there is a potential to confuse and mislead the consumers. Some schemes do not make their standards public, other standards are the same as the minimum legal standards or have little or no independent control mechanism.

**For this reason Eurogroup calls on the Commission to establish a legal framework for all Food quality schemes or assurance schemes which take account of the following;**

### **Framework for quality schemes**

The ability of a scheme to deliver high animal welfare is dependent on the rigour of its procedures. Eight issues which Eurogroup believes are imperative to the operation of an assurance scheme should be considered:

- establishment and fixing of standards
- transparency
- auditing
- inspection
- labelling
- traceability
- sanctions

## 1. Establishment and fixing of standards

### 1.1 *Setting the standards*

The establishment of standards should be based on a wide consultation with input from as many interested parties as feasibly possible.

### 1.2 *Reviewing the standards*

Standards should be regularly reviewed (at least once a year) and a review system set up that includes experts independent from the scheme. This should include representatives from other stakeholder interests such as consumers.

### 1.3 *Coverage of the standards*

Standards should cover all stages from birth to death of the animal. If the scheme is aimed at a specific area such as animal welfare, it is essential that it also provides standards in other areas that are consistent with legislation. In particular compliance with food safety standards and risk assessments on biosecurity arrangements. In the UK HACCP (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point) has been recommended to be extended from abattoirs and food processing into farm production.

### 1.4 *Level set by the standards*

It is not the role of this paper to prescribe detailed standards, as examples can be found in many assurance schemes<sup>1</sup>. Any assurance scheme that is delivering high welfare should be constantly monitoring its standards and raising them, for instance in reaction to changes in the legislative baseline standards or in new technological advances. Eurogroup recommends that quality schemes must be delivering standards that are well above baseline legal standards or conventional farming standards.

### 1.5 *Communication of the standards*

The standards should be formed and presented in clear unambiguous language.

## 2. Transparency

The scheme should be as transparent as possible. In particular all standards should be openly available and accessible and information on the operation of the scheme and its assessment also available. Better consumer information can be generated through a variety of mechanisms including individual websites.

## 3. Auditing

### 3.1 *Independence*

The independence of the audit is crucial. The certifying body should be independent of the standard setting body and accredited to the European standard on farm assurance, EN 45011.

### 3.2 *Timing*

An audit of the scheme should be completed on an annual basis and be on a set proportion of the operators to ensure effectiveness of the inspection system.

### 3.3 *Qualifications and training*

All personnel auditing a scheme should have a minimal level of experience and qualification in auditing. It is recommended that this is linked to a quality assurance qualification or a formal auditing qualification. The personnel should also have experience in the livestock sector being audited. A training programme should be established to ensure that there is harmonisation of standards being applied. Auditors should be members of International Register of Certified Auditors.

### 3.4 *Second layer of assessment*

An additional level of assessment to the audit needs to be established to ensure that the audit system is operating to its specifications. Spot checks should be done on the auditing system and the consistency of auditing.

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<sup>1</sup> Freedom Food has detailed animal welfare standards on 8 species. Assurance schemes delivering high welfare standards are found in Sweden (the Krav scheme), and Germany (Blue Angel scheme). Eurogroup for Animals has proposed specific welfare standards in four sectors to act as baselines for qualification for producers to financial assistance under the WTO's Green box.

#### **4. Labelling**

##### *4.1 Transparency of labelling*

Labelling should be clear and honest and reflect the level of the standards.

##### *4.2 Consistency with legislative standards*

Where marketing of other standards exist (eg Regulation 5/2001 on the marketing and labelling of eggs, Regulation 1804/99 on the requirements for organic schemes) the labelling should be consistent with the standards laid down under these rules.

#### **5. Traceability**

##### *5.1 Process*

A process of traceability should be established that would include each stage of the supply chain eg retailers, processors, packers, producers and provide sufficient segregation of the products to ensure complete traceability of any product under the assurance scheme. This would include procedures for database control, control of documents and maintenance of records.

##### *5.2 Checks*

It is recommended that periodic spot checks occur on products from the shelf of retailers to ensure that the traceability process is operating to the standards laid down in the scheme.

#### **7. Sanctions**

A system of sanctions should be available and applied for non-compliance with the scheme. This system should establish the different levels of sanctions and the time periods to ensure that rectifying action is completed by the producer to comply with the standards. It is recommended that one of the sanctions for the most serious offences and repetition of offences is suspension from the scheme.