

EUROPEAN FOOD FRAUD CONFERENCE – 29/30 JANUARY 2008

Background

A European Food Fraud Conference was held in Birmingham on the 29th and 30th January 2008. The event was jointly organised by the Food Law Enforcement Practitioners (FLEP) forum and the UK Food Standards Agency (FSA).

Attendees

The Conference was attended by approximately 70 representatives from the enforcement agencies responsible for tackling food fraud in a number of EU Member States, including Austria, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Sweden and the UK. Also represented were the EC Commission and the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF). The Conference was opened by the FSA Deputy Chair, Dr Ian Reynolds.

Conference Programme

The Conference comprised presentations from Member States on their experience of food fraud, the approach being taken in each country to tackle the issue and their suggestions on what needed to be done to ensure food fraud could be dealt with effectively. There was also a presentation from OLAF on the role they played in assisting with tackling cross-border fraud activity. A series of themed workshops also provided the attendees with the opportunity to take part in a more detailed discussion around some of the key aspects of developing effective systems to deal with food fraud within the EU.

Summary of Discussions

The presentations from the various Member States highlighted a variety of differing approaches being adopted to tackle food fraud. This included dedicated sections of the national police force with responsibility for all aspects of food law enforcement (Italy), the establishment of a food fraud 'Flying Squad' comprising a team with varying relevant experience to assist local food inspectors in complex investigations (Denmark), and a research based approach to identifying behavioural and compliance indicators for food fraud (Netherlands). The UK also presented its approach to tackling food fraud, the involvement of local authorities, recent developments around the work of its Food Fraud Task Force, the setting up of a food fraud database, and work on food authenticity.

Despite the differing approaches adopted, a number of common themes emerged from the presentations and the subsequent workshops around:

- The value of cross-border communication and co-ordination in forming effective networks to tackle what can be wide-reaching, complex and sophisticated food fraud operations. The need to explore the potential for developing informal/formal mechanisms for exchanging food fraud intelligence and/or research between all EU Member States and the role of OLAF in cross-border investigations. The need to share information on analytical methods and the outcome of authenticity studies was also recognised.
- The importance of building intelligence resources and carrying out research to facilitate trend analysis and gain a better understanding of the level and nature of food fraud activity. This in turn will enable quick and effective action to be taken to address food fraud where it arises and for

preventative measures to be put in place. There was a recognised need to put in place appropriate mechanisms to ensure that food fraud intelligence from a variety of sources was captured. Innovative research studies into alternative interventions and behavioural indicators to proactively tackle food fraud was also highlighted as a valuable source of information.

- The vital role of legitimate traders and consumers in tackling food fraud and the importance of ensuring that these groups feel able to report potentially fraudulent activity. To encourage this, Member States need to ensure that appropriate opportunities for reporting food fraud were provided and publicised and that an environment of trust existed that information would be treated confidentially. The importance of being seen to act on intelligence, where appropriate, was also noted.
- The need to identify and address skills gaps in investigation techniques, building on the existing role of food law enforcement officers. It was recognised that the traditional approach used for inspection of food premises would not routinely uncover fraudulent activity and that enforcement officers' investigative skills would need to be developed further. The role of the European Commission, as well as individual Member States was highlighted.
- The need to tackle all types of food fraud, whilst recognising that priority is given to fraud that compromises public health, particularly within limited resources. A clear distinction was identified between food fraud with the potential to impact upon public health, which was understandably given priority and other types of food fraud. However, the importance of ensuring that all food fraud be appropriately investigated was acknowledged and there was general agreement that mechanisms for achieving this, building on, for example, the European Rapid Alert System for Feed and Food (RASFF), should be explored.

Next Steps

The Conference attendees agreed that the event had been extremely successful and had identified a number of common areas for improvement to be taken forward, both within individual Member States and as a co-ordinated network. There were also significant opportunities to learn from the experiences of different Member States in dealing with food fraud.

A Working Group of the FLEP Forum is to be established to look at some of the specific issues identified with a view to developing appropriate mechanisms for improvements to be implemented and experiences to be shared in greater detail. The options for holding regular European food fraud events will also be considered.