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"EMERGING RISK IDENTIFICATION FROM A RISK MANAGER POINT OF VIEW"

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EMERGING RISKS FROM A MANAGER'S POINT OF VIEW

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SPEECH

Ladies and gentlemen

It is a pleasure to be here today to talk about emerging risks in food safety from a manager's point of view.

It is an indisputable fact that today our food, especially here in the EU, is safer than it has ever been. As you are all very well aware, we did not reach these levels of food safety accidentally. It took a lot of hard work after a series of food crises in the 90s –BSE, for instance– shook the very foundations of consumer confidence in Europe.

In response to these crises, we introduced strong, comprehensive measures to overhaul, streamline and modernise our European food safety system.

Let me remind you briefly that our approach was threefold:

- We introduced strict new laws on food safety covering the entire European Union;
- We set up the European Food Safety Authority, an independent body responsible for giving scientific advice and information on any risks associated with the food chain; and
- We introduced the concept of food safety right across the food chain – our "farm to fork" principle; or from the stable to the table, as some prefer to call it.
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A successful approach indeed. But, unfortunately, we cannot and should not rest on our laurels. The BSE, to which I just referred, is a fine example of the importance of tackling in time emerging risks and of the usual problem that accompanies them – the lack of scientific information, or the absence of a tool for the risk manager that will provide quick and sound scientific advice.

Up until it emerged, BSE was a totally unknown new disease – there were no scientific data about it. Only a decade after it emerged, when we got more scientific evidence, we found out what we should have done 10 years earlier.

Moving to what it is happening today, it would be fair to note that the increasing complexity of our food and feed production systems, the globalisation of trade, the introduction of novel foods and of new food processing technologies and climate change, may all give rise to new emerging risks. These risks could have adverse effects on human, animal and plant health, whilst they can also have a negative impact on international trade and our economies.

Also, already known risks may re-merge with a vengeance and increase in frequency due again to a variety of reasons such as the expansion of our internal market, changes in the habits of our citizens or the changing conditions and methods relating to food production.

A series of challenges lay ahead of us and they have to do, first and foremost, with how to identify these emerging or re-emerging risks. Then they relate with how to manage them and, last but not least, with how to communicate about them.

The Commission realised the need to properly identify these risks in the late '90s. Back then, the Scientific Committees could draw the Commission's attention to any new emerging risk. However, the resources through this procedure were very limited and it was impossible to address all emerging issues properly.

Now, this task is shouldered by EFSA, which is better equipped to deal with the identification of emerging risks.

The Commission recognises the complexity of this task, as well as its sensitive nature, and believes that work in this area should contribute to the establishment of a monitoring procedure through which data and information would be collected and analysed.

The Commission is well aware that EFSA is already working on this and it is now elaborating its system for data collection. In that respect, notifications in the Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed (RASFF) are a useful source of information.

Procedures in this area need to be well defined in order to avoid duplication in the work of the risk assessor and that of the risk manager, and ensure coherence of the data collection strategy.

It is at this early stage that risk management intersects with risk assessment. For, if the outcome of the risk assessor's work is not balanced or proportionate to the risk in question that would make the manager's work a Sisyphean task.

A risk manager is always susceptible to criticism – the perception is that sometimes risk managers ignore information on emerging risks, while other times we are accused of being slow in reacting, or not doing enough. These false perceptions often result in loss of consumer confidence in the safety of food and in the systems ensuring this safety.

On the other hand, risk managers can also be accused of over-reacting if a risk in the end proves to be negligible.

When there is overreaction, and sometimes there has been, unnecessary scares for the consumer emerge, which could lead to disruptions in trade and, even, possible legal actions.

The fact that there is an abundance of information readily available with the click of a button over the internet makes the job of a risk manager even harder. Nowadays anyone can research any topic on the internet. Dr. Google provides extensive answers on pretty much anything. Of course, the quality and reliability of the source of information can rarely be verified or double-checked.

This is one of the reasons why it is critically important that the Risk Assessor does not overwhelm the Risk Manager –at community or national level– with information.

Information needs to be well analysed and digestible. If that doesn't happen, the risk manager will be forced to ask the assessor for systematic assessments concerning the relevance of the emerging risks in order to address them in an appropriate and proportionate manner.

In other words, the temptation to try and be as comprehensive as possible and to examine all possible sources of available information in all areas of competence endangers the principle of proportionality and the attempt to strike a necessary and much needed balance.

When people are attempting to cross a street they look left, then right, then left again before crossing over.

They don't look up to protect themselves from the unlikelihood a brick or a tile would fall off a building and hit them. And they surely do not check the sky to be sure that a meteorite is not about to squash them if they attempt to cross.

Therefore, it is necessary first to identify and then to manage the emerging-risk challenges in a way that is not overambitious and that is proportionate to, and feasible with, the available resources. Following this route, keeping it as simple as necessary, also ensures a smoother delivery of what is already quite complex and difficult-to-understand information to the broader public.

Besides, we should never lose sight of the main objective of this exercise, which is, after all, prevention of real emerging risks without creating false expectations or, even worse, fears. Food safety is our shared and primary goal, but we should not –in its name– create unjustified scares among the members of the public.

And this brings us to the third and final part of how to deal with emerging risks – communicating the information to the citizens.

The simpler and the more proportionate and balanced we keep the risk assessment and risk management procedures the easier would be to communicate about their outcomes.

In times of potential or actual crisis it is essential that people receive clear, consistent and up-to-date information about the situation, which -in case of a real risk- it could be changing rapidly. When people are given accurate and useful information they are better equipped to make informed decisions. And it can also help avoid panic and all its adverse consequences.

In my experience, I have found that tackling risks –perceived, ongoing or emerging– is one of the greatest challenges we face. Yet they're also manageable if we have the right tools, mechanisms and the most up-to-date scientific advice in place, if common sense is applied and if we coordinate our actions and communicate sensibly about them.

The better prepared we are to identify, manage and communicate a new or an emerging risk, the more likely it is that we will be successful in carrying out our joint task. And let me stress again that by "better," I do not mean more –carrying out more actions– but being well-focused and always proportionate to the potential risk involved.

I wish you the very best.