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Consumer, Environmental and Health Technologies

FIRST MEETING OF THE HIGH LEVEL FORUM FOR A BETTER FUNCTIONING FOOD SUPPLY CHAIN: 15H DECEMBER 2016

Summary report

The inaugural meeting of the High Level Forum for a Better Functioning Food Supply Chain took place on 15 December 2016. All Forum Members were present at the meeting, representing the entire food supply chain, Member States and civil society.

In her opening speech, Commissioner Bieńkowska underlined the importance of the EU food and drink sector for the EU economy and its leading position worldwide in terms of taste, safety and eco-friendliness. The Commissioner highlighted the role of the EU Single Market for the success of the sector, but stressed that in the last two years 'more barriers have appeared than disappeared'. Commissioner Bieńkowska openly stated that there is no place for Unfair Trading Practices (UTPs) in the modern food supply chain. She underlined the importance of looking towards the future in a holistic way and invited Forum Members to focus on upcoming opportunities (as ICT and innovation). The Commissioner stressed that the Forum has a clear mandate in assisting the Commission in its policy-making for the food supply chain.

Xavier Prats Monné (Director General DG SANTE) underlined in his intervention that health, competitiveness and the Single Market are strongly intertwined and not mutually exclusive. He stressed the importance of the relationship between consumers and the rest of the supply chain and also referred to the subject of origin labelling. Based on the findings of several reports, he considered that the best way to respond to consumers' interests in the origin of foodstuffs is to strengthen and further develop the voluntary origin labelling schemes. He pledged to adopt the implementing act on origin labelling of primary ingredients early next year. Other issues referred to were safety labels, nutritional profiles and healthy diets.

The session on fair and efficient trading practices, moderated by DG GROW Director Carlo Pettinelli, started with a statement from the Supply Chain Initiative (SCI) outlining its structure and plan for reform in 2017. Then, the debate opened for Forum Members to present their stance on tackling UTPs. All Members agreed that action should be taken on the issue, with a majority of Member States' representatives expressing agreement with the recommendations of the independent Agri Markets Taskforce (AMTF). Most speakers also welcomed the recent Council Conclusions on UTPs and expressed their support for legislative action at EU level, while a minority supported the purely voluntary approach and expressed the need for defining clear added value of any EU-wide legislative framework. Many food industry stakeholders mentioned that UTPs are not a 'farmers only' problem, but affect everyone in the food supply chain. DG GROW Director General Lowri Evans concluded the panel referring to the up-coming work ahead of the Sherpas and appealing to Members to come forward with concrete proposals on tackling unfair trading practices.

The second session focused on the different aspects of competitiveness of the sector. There was a strong call from various Members on the Commission to defend the Single market for food. Many Members underlined the need to further incorporate innovation and digital solutions in the food business. Issues such as sustainability, health and information to consumers were highlighted. DG GROW Director Carlo Pettinelli emphasised the need to streamline horizontal EU initiatives (such as the European Fund for Strategic Investment and the Digital Single Market Strategy) into the food sector.

Commissioner Hogan gave an overview of the recent findings of the Agricultural Markets Task Force and possible follow up. He emphasized the need to tackle UTPs in the nearest future and also referenced other areas of potential action, including in the fields of price transparency and competition law. He recalled that the CAP provides a legal basis for improving the position of farmers in the food supply chain. With regard to concrete proposals on UTPs, he noted the large majority in favour of an EU legislative framework in the European Parliament, the recent Council Conclusions, as well as the recommendations of the AMTF and the Commission Work Programme all pointing in the direction of 2017 being a year for action. The Commissioner underlined that he looked forward to working together with Commissioner Bieńkowska. He welcomed the role of the HLF as complementary to the other work going on in this area, and as constituting a part of a comprehensive approach to balancing relations in the food supply chain.

The Work Programme of the Forum was unanimously adopted as a 'living document'. DG Lowri Evans, welcomed the Programme and called for an even more ambitious agenda of work in the nearest future.

RTD Director John Bell presented the Food 2030 initiative, focusing on the place of innovation and R&D in the food supply chain of the future.

DG Lowri Evans concluded the meeting, congratulating the Forum on its work and highlighting the value of synergies with overall EU policies on boosting competitiveness. The next HLF in 2017 should be given a concrete set of ideas for Forum Members to endorse. The work of the Sherpa group will start in the first trimester of 2017.