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**COUNCIL OF  
THE EUROPEAN UNION**



11006/11

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## **PRESS RELEASE**

Extraordinary Council meeting

### **Agriculture**

Luxembourg, 7 June 2011

President

**Sándor FAZEKAS**  
Minister for Rural development of Hungary

# **P R E S S**

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## **Main results of the Council**

*During this extraordinary meeting of the Council, agriculture ministers assessed the **food safety and market implications of the E. coli outbreak.***

*Finally, ministers were briefed on the **drought situation in Europe and its impact on the bovine sector.***

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- <sup>1</sup>
- Where declarations, conclusions or resolutions have been formally adopted by the Council, this is indicated in the heading for the item concerned and the text is placed between quotation marks.
  - Documents for which references are given in the text are available on the Council's Internet site (<http://www.consilium.europa.eu>).
  - Acts adopted with statements for the Council minutes which may be released to the public are indicated by an asterisk; these statements are available on the Council's Internet site or may be obtained from the Press Office.

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Mr Dacian CIOLOȘ

Member

Mr John DALLI

Member

## **ITEMS DEBATED**

### **E. coli outbreak**

Following the debate on the *E. coli* outbreak opened by the Presidency at the informal meeting of agriculture ministers in Debrecen (Hungary), this extraordinary meeting was convened by the Presidency in order to enable Ministers to discuss the EU food safety and market implications of the recent outbreak of *E. coli* in northern Germany and to hear the Commission on its response to the crisis.

Concerning food safety, all member states deeply regretted the high number of fatalities caused by *Escherichia coli* (*E. coli*) contamination in northern Germany. Several delegations pointed out the need to assess the current EU food safety system and improve the dissemination of information between national food safety authorities and the quality of this information. As the source of contamination has yet to be clearly identified, many member states stressed the need to continue investigations along the food chain to restore consumer confidence in the vegetables mentioned as the possible source of contamination at the start of the outbreak. At the moment, it would seem the outbreak has only affected people in northern Germany and people who have visited the region since the beginning of May.

The Commission recalled that all existing EU mechanisms for information sharing and response coordination were triggered as soon as the first cases were reported on 22 May. More specifically, the Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed (RASFF) and the Early Warning and Response System for communicable diseases (EWRS) were activated. However, the Commission intends to draw lessons from the current crisis and improve current information systems if needed.

As regards the market implications, the vast majority of delegations expressed serious concerns about the catastrophic situation of the fruits and vegetables sector at the national and EU level. They noted that producers had been deeply affected by a crisis that they had no hand in creating. In the light of the depth of the crisis for many producing countries, producer member states urged the Commission to deploy measures for use in emergency situations in order to provide full compensation to all the concerned producers. Several delegations considered national state aid inappropriate in this case and stressed the need for an EU response to an EU-wide crisis.

The Commission confirmed its intention to invoke the emergency provision in order to partially compensate producers who have suffered great losses. It recalled that the budget is limited to the existing funds. Nonetheless, in the light of the difficult situation of the fruit and vegetables sector, the Commission committed to offer substantial, balanced and justified compensation taking account of the losses incurred, the limits of the rules and the budget available.

Under the current single common market organisation (CMO) rules for fruit and vegetables, measures in this sector primarily come under the responsibility of national producers organisations which can set up operational funds to finance limited withdrawals of products from the market in cases of crisis, co-financed by the EU and the member states. In certain cases, national state aids may also be provided. In emergency situations the Commission may derogate from these rules to the strict extent necessary e.g. by providing up to 100% EU budget financing.

As regards the implications of the crisis on international trade, the Council strongly rejected the recent bans adopted by Russia on EU exports of vegetables and fruits which are causing major economic losses to farmers and traders. In this context it was underlined that the EU should send a strong message to the Russian authorities pointing out that these trade disruptions are scientifically unjustified and disproportionate. The Commission undertook to use the forthcoming EU-Russia Summit as an adequate moment to stress the EU stance on this matter.

In view of the high number of deaths and the huge economic impact of the recent outbreak of *E. coli* in the EU, the Presidency convened an extraordinary meeting of agriculture ministers. This meeting followed the Council meeting of 6 June at which health ministers were briefed on the latest developments on this outbreak (10986/11) and the informal meeting of agriculture ministers in Debrecen on 31 May for which the subject was added to the agenda.

## **ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

### **Drought situation in Europe**

France supported by Belgium once again briefed the Council on the impact of the drought situation in certain European countries, in particular on the bovine sector (11111/11).

The French delegation highlighted the foreseeable losses of yields in the case of certain crops if the drought situation persisted. It also noted that in addition many livestock farmers were now selling bovine animals as they would not be able to feed them in the future. This could have drastic consequences for the bovine market in the long term.

The Commission expressed its commitment to continue to address the situation within the existing rules and also informed delegations that a working group on beef and veal has been established in order to examine how to improve the existing market tools with a view to making concrete recommendations.

As early as 17 May 2011, France supported by several delegations, voiced concerns about the current drought situation and resulting cash flow difficulties faced by farmers. The Commission was asked to bring the disbursement of direct payments forward. In this context, many delegations also called for greater flexibility or a standard procedure for advance payments.

The Commission representative recalled that member states can provide for advances of direct payments, once that the necessary checks have been carried out. On this occasion, the Commission informed the Council of its intention to address the problem faced by suckler cow farmers severely affected by drought.