

# Comment

## Distracted on Europe

EUROPEAN legislation is not top of many people's preferred reading lists, and the text can be somewhat daunting, which could be one of the reasons why UK politicians seem to be happier arguing about whether or not to commit to a future referendum on EU membership than focusing on matters at hand. Nevertheless, a package of proposed measures adopted by the European Commission last week is important and should not be ignored. The measures are intended to modernise, simplify and strengthen enforcement of health and safety standards throughout the food chain and, as such, will have a significant impact on animal health and food safety activity for years to come. Once adopted, they will affect what happens in the UK irrespective of the outcome of all the political wrangling currently going on in Westminster, so MPs and others with an interest in this area might usefully devote some attention to them now.

Animal health has been subject to the attention of European legislators ever since the EU was founded, mainly because of the importance attached to agriculture and recognition of the need to be able to trade animals and their products safely in the single market while also protecting consumers. Over the years, the rules have multiplied, to the extent that there are currently more than 40 EU Directives and Regulations governing activity in the animal health field alone. The Commission's proposals aim to replace these with just one piece of legislation, while providing a legal framework for implementing the EU's Animal Health Strategy, which was agreed by member states in 2007. Also included in the package are new legislative arrangements governing official controls which, given the

involvement of veterinarians in this area, will clearly have an impact on veterinary activity, as well as new legislation relating to plant health and plant reproductive material (including seeds). The aim, the Commission says, is to provide 'a modernised, more risk-based approach to the protection of health, and more efficient control tools to ensure the effective application of the rules guiding the operation of the food chain'.

Like the animal health strategy, the animal health law will be based on the principle that prevention is better than cure. Among the aims will be 'to improve standards and provide a common system to better detect and control disease and tackle health, food and feed safety risks in a coordinated way'. This enhanced system, allied with better rules on identification and registration, will, the Commission hopes, 'give those working to protect our food chain, such as farmers and veterinarians, the capability to react quickly and to limit the spread of disease and minimise its impact on livestock and on consumers'. The legislation will also introduce categorisation and prioritisation of diseases requiring EU intervention, enabling 'a more risk-based approach and appropriate use of resources'.

The official controls legislation, meanwhile, is intended to make it easier for national and other relevant authorities to take effective action to ensure that all the rules are complied with. This, too, follows a risk-based approach, so that the authorities can focus resources on the issues that are most relevant. The Commission is also proposing extending the system of fees to finance the controls so that, with the exception of 'micro-enterprises', all operators who benefit directly from the controls will be expected to contribute to them financially.

It would be hard to argue that a preventative, risk-based approach to animal health together with a more holistic 'farm to fork' approach to food safety is inappropriate, or that producers should not take responsibility for the health of their animals. It would also be hard to argue, in the wake of the horsemeat scandal, for example, that effective controls are not needed on an EU-wide basis. In these and other respects, the Commission's proposals have much to commend them. However, the question of who pays for what is, as always, likely to prove contentious. Also, as with any legislative exercise, particularly one on this scale, there is a big difference between drawing up rules and getting them implemented, and the practical consequences, including possible unintended consequences, will need to be fully thought through. Given the scope of the exercise, there will be plenty to keep members of the European Parliament busy in the months ahead, along with everyone else with an interest in the outcome.

This brings us back to the debate going on at Westminster, and talk of a referendum in 2017. MPs will no doubt continue to argue about the pros and cons of EU membership but, as they do so, they should not lose sight of legislation being developed in Brussels in the meantime. This will continue to affect what happens in the UK, and as an EU member, the UK must play its full part, and be in a position to play its full part, in trying to make sure that the legislation is right. Westminster MPs may feel compelled to play to the gallery, but they also need to keep their eye on the ball.

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