

EU Veterinary Week
"Identification and traceability along the food chain"

Speech by
Paolo De Castro

Ladies and gentlemen

I am very happy to be with you today to conclude the first day of the EU Veterinary Week, launched by this two-day conference, focusing on the link between identification and traceability for veterinary purposes and the different additional benefits along the food chain.

Ten years ago the image of the European food system was at its lowest point, as a result of a series of several damaging crises with severe consequences for public confidence in the European food supply.

As Commissioner John Dalli recently said in Parma, in a conference hosted by The European Food Safety Authority, those dark days were the trigger for the "silent revolution" which has completely transformed the European food safety system into the coherent and rational model we have today.

This was achieved also thanks to the contribution of identification and traceability systems. Experience shows that today traceability helps to ensure the highest possible levels of food safety and hygiene, as well as ensuring food quality and taste. It took years, technological innovations and important legislative decisions to arrive at a coherent and comprehensive legal framework and to develop the necessary tools that would strengthen the European food chain.

A system of guarantees is not only important for the safety of our citizens but also for the entire food chain. If one of the key elements on which to build competitiveness of European food supply will be quality, then the role of traceability will be strategic.

I believe this is the best way to defend the European social model and combine it with a path of growth of the European food system. But I also believe that much still needs to be done.

First, I am convinced that innovation plays a key role in the current scenario. Investing in research, in knowledge diffusion, and in service structures, as well as stimulating access to organizational and process innovations, are today necessary conditions to strengthen and respond to the social and market needs. In general I believe that innovation will be a *must* for competing on the global market and, at the same time, increase the level of public goods generated by agriculture and food system. I agree with the idea of a policy of "responsible innovation", as has been set by John Dalli, where advancement is actively encouraged but at the same time supported by issues of risk and safety.

But this also means facilitating the connection between science and citizens. I strongly believe that we need a much more open and inclusive debate about innovations in agriculture and food, to address the instinctive fear and suspicion which remains widespread amongst European citizens.

Second, the information provided to consumers plays an important role. Parliament and Commission are currently engaged on the issue of labelling legislation with the aim of promoting a more transparent information to our citizens. This is an important issue, on which we must be especially careful to identify concrete ways through which to safeguard the transparency of information, its usability, and competitiveness of our food supply.

This does not mean we are saying some foods are good or bad and this does not mean consumers should be overburden with complex information. I am confident that the work we are doing on "the European Commission's proposed Regulation on the Provision of Food Information to Consumers" will lead us to decisions that will be consistent with the expectations of European society.

Finally, linked to the transparency of information, is the more general issue of social concerns linked to the food global market. It is well known that the production and marketing of agricultural products and foodstuffs trading partners may have different qualitative and normative standards in different countries and even different

institutional capacity to enforce these rules. It makes markets far from efficient, often producing a negative effect on producers seeking to maintain high standards, due to the higher costs incurred, and on consumers, who are prevented from recognizing and assigning value to the product's tangible and intangible attributes

Regarding this point it is important to promote the concept of so called reciprocity. This last point is a fundamental condition to ensure that European efforts to improve quality, animal welfare and food safety are not defeated by a market which is unable to recognise the social values embedded in a product. In the future, we must reduce distorting impacts arising from the possibility that players outside the system of Community regulations might convert the lower constraints to which they are subject into considerable competitive advantages. It would therefore seem appropriate both to improve the accompanying product information so as to redress the market's inability to recognise incorporated social values, and to encourage greater international convergence of social and environmental standards

In this way we could ensure that the expectations in the European social model are satisfied and that the competitiveness of our food system will not be punished.