



*European Communities
Commission
Background Report*

20 Kensington Palace Gardens
London W8 4QQ
Telephone: 01-727 8090

ISEC/B48/78

June 29, 1978

FOOD AND PLASTIC PACKAGING

Summary

There has been a tremendous increase in the packaging of food in recent years, and especially of the use of plastics for this purpose. After contact with foodstuffs for reasonably long periods, however, plastics can transfer substances to the food itself. This can present dangers. Vinyl chloride, for instance, one of the substances used in the manufacture of plastics, is known to lead to cancer, so it is an important public health matter to protect consumers from any toxic effects.

At present limits on usage differ from country to country, whereas the goods concerned may be packed in one country and sold in another, so in the interests of public health and to remove barriers to trade, the Commission has sent the Council of Ministers a proposal* which would lay down an overall 'migration' limit, with rules for technical verification that would apply throughout the Community.

Case for a common limit

Intra-Community trade in processed foodstuffs is worth about £6,000m. Of this, a large proportion of the goods is plastic packaged.

In fact all Community countries have laws or regulations governing health standards for food which reflect on packaging. Where plastics are concerned, several member countries, particularly Belgium, France, Italy and the Netherlands, have adopted legislation to limit the possible contamination of foodstuffs by insisting on maximum limits of transfer or 'migration' for plastic materials.

As far back as December 1973 the Council of Ministers agreed on a Resolution to include in its programme for the elimination of technical barriers, the harmonization of laws covering 'materials and objects intended to come into contact with foodstuffs'. This was followed in November 1976 by adoption of an outline directive⁽¹⁾ on materials and objects intended to come into contact with foodstuffs, such as ceramics, plastic materials, paper and paperboard.

The Council has already adopted a specific directive concerned with monomer vinyl chloride residues⁽²⁾, and the proposal for plastics is part of the on-going general programme.

* COM(78) 115 final, 29 May 1978

(1) OJ No. L 340, 9.12.1976

(2) OJ No. L 44, 15.2.1978

*** Note: Background reports are intended as non-copyright ready-reference material on topics of current interest concerning the European Community. An index will be provided periodically so anyone receiving the reports can refer to each number more easily.

The introduction by four member countries of different levels of 'migration' and the varying legislation now applying in other countries often makes it difficult, the Commission argues, for exporters to know where they stand when packaging their goods with plastic materials. The Commission is therefore proposing an overall 'migration' limit of 60mg/kg in foods and of 60mg/litre for liquid foodstuffs with provision for testing the packaging with 'simulants'.

The Commission proposal has the support of the European Parliament, the Economic and Social Committee, various consumer and producer organizations and of the Consultative Committee for foodstuffs.

The British way

The United Kingdom does not yet have specific legislation regarding the packaging or containment of foodstuffs comparable to that in the four Community countries or that proposed by the Commission.

British consumers are given general protection under Section 2 of the Food and Drugs Act 1958, but UK legislation does not rely on specific chemical formulae as the criterion for assessing dangers to health. In the Commission's view, specific limits are a valuable way of facilitating free trade and in protecting consumers against hazards to health.

*

*

*