Newsletter on food safety, health and consumer policy
from the European Commission's Health and Consumers DG

Health & Consumer Voice

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Commission launches consultation for out-of-court settlement of consumer disputes

Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) schemes, also known as "out-of-court mechanisms", have been developed across Europe to help citizens engaged in a consumer dispute who have been unable to reach an agreement directly with the trader. ADR schemes usually use a third party to help the consumer and the trader to reach a solution. A public consultation on this matter has now been launched.

The advantage of ADR is that it offers more flexibility than going to court and can better meet the needs of both consumers and professionals. Compared to going to court these schemes are cheaper, quicker and more informal.

However, these out-of-court mechanisms have been developed differently across the European Union: some are the fruit of public initiatives both at central level and at local level, or they may spring from private initiatives. Because of this diversity, the status of the decisions adopted by these bodies differs greatly, too. Some are merely recommendations, others are only

binding for the professional, and others are binding for both parties.

The European Commission has been active in promoting the development of Alternative Dispute Resolution as a mean to resolve disputes related to commercial transactions and practices in the EU. In this frame, a public consultation on the use of alternative dispute resolution (ADR) has now been launched.

The purpose is to consult on the difficulties identified in relation to ADR in the EU and the ways to improve it. Stakeholders and public authorities are invited to provide their feedback on the issues, preferably backed with concrete examples and/or figures. The consultation period runs from 18 January to 15 March 2011.

The consultation document is available at:

http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/health_consumer/dgs_consultations/ca/adr_consultation_18012011_en.htm

EU response to the dioxin crisis

The issue of dioxin incident in Germany was discussed during the Agriculture Council held on 24 January in Brussels, where Ministers assessed the situation with regard to the latest developments. After having managed the emergency in close cooperation with the German authorities, the European Commission envisages imposing a strict separation between the production of fats for industrial use and fats used to manufacture components of animal feed.

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In brief

Behavioural study on investment decisions

Simpler and standardised product information could greatly improve EU consumers' investment decisions, according to a Commission behavioural study on Consumer Decision-making in Retail Investment Services recently published.

The study identifies the behavioural traits and external factors that most influence EU consumers' investment decisions. This analysis is a follow-up to the findings of the 2009 Consumer Markets Scoreboard, which found the retail investment services market to be among the worst performing markets for consumers.

The document will be used to complement the future Commission consultation on improving the regulation of packaged retail investment products, in order to better protect consumers by making investment products more transparent and easier to compare, and ensuring effective sales rules.

The full text of the study is available at:

http://ec.europa.eu/consumers/strategy/docs/final_report_en.pdf

New Europe for Patients website now online

The multilingual and thematic website of the campaign "Europe for patients" is now online with a vibrant new look.

The website is the information hub where you can find updated fact-sheets, news, events, press releases and videos related to the "Europe for Patients" campaign, aimed at putting patients at the very centre of EU health policy.

The brand new website is available at:

http://ec.europa.eu/health-eu/europe_for_patients/index_en.htm

Europe for Patients

Commissioner for Health and Consumer Policy John Dalli announced that the Commission is going to present the following four concrete measures in the upcoming weeks for debate and vote in the Standing Committee on the Food Chain and Animal Health (SCOFCAH):

1) The compulsory approval of establishments manufacturing, treating and marketing fats and fatty acids.

2) The separation/segregation of production streams will be examined very thoroughly.

3) With respect to dioxin monitoring, a strict plan for sampling and analysis for critical materials in fat producing plants will be established. It may also be appropriate to cover other activities in the feed chain by increased monitoring. A dioxin data-base, for instance, is already established within the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA).

4) The extension to private laboratories of reporting obligations of positive findings could also be included in a potential package of reinforced dioxin monitoring.

"The proper management of the dioxin incident in Germany is of utmost importance for the Commission and must be pursued with urgency and effectiveness. My services and the German authorities are in permanent contact and the level of cooperation is very good. The Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed as well as the traceability mechanisms in place at EU level have shown their effectiveness. In the coming weeks, I will explore with our EU partners and stakeholders ways to further strengthen our monitoring processes of dioxin in feed", Commissioner Dalli declared.

The European Commission is closely monitoring the situation with the German authorities and all relevant information related to this contamination incident will be immediately transmitted through the Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed (RASFF). A dedicated website has also been created regarding this contamination incident (http://ec.europa.eu/food/food/chemicalsafety/contaminants/dioxin_germany_en.htm).

Further information is available at:

http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=MEMO/ 11/8&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=en

Commission working for safe herbal medicines in the EU

The Traditional Herbal Medicinal Products Directive of 2004 features a 7-year transitional period which will expire on 30 April 2011. But what will this mean for manufacturers of traditional herbal medicinal products?

A traditional herbal medicinal product is any medicinal product containing as an active ingredient herbal substances or herbal preparations which can be shown to have a traditional use of at least 30 years, with at least 15 years in the European Union.

Examples of herbals used in traditional herbal medicinal products include Calendula officinalis L; Echinacea purpurea L.; Eleutherococcus senticosus; Hamamelis virginiana L; Mentha x piperita L.

The Traditional Herbal Medicinal Products Directive (2004/24/EC) was adopted on 31 March 2004. It aims to facilitate the placing on the EU market of traditional herbal medicinal products that despite their long tradition were not eligible for a full marketing authorisation. It also seeks to ensure the protection of public health by defining guarantees of quality and safety. Although such products are natural, some can nevertheless provoke adverse reactions so they need to be covered under EU pharmaceutical legislation.

In view of the long tradition behind these medicinal products, it was decided to provide a special, simplified registration procedure. The simplified procedure allows the registration of traditional herbal medicinal products without submitting documentation on tests and trials on safety and efficacy, which the applicant would be obliged to provide under the full marketing authorisation procedure. Instead, the applicant only has to provide sufficient evidence of the medicinal use of the product throughout a period of at least 30 years, including at least 15 years in the European Union. This procedure is clearly less burdensome than the full marketing authorisation. It facilitates the access of these products to the EU market, while ensuring the safety of herbal medicines for EU citizens.

Traditional herbal medicinal products that were legally on the market before 30 April 2004 were allowed to remain on the market without complying with the Directive until the end of the transitional period. This has provided manufacturers with a full seven years to submit an application for registration. It is now up to potential applicants to submit their application to the competent Member State authorities in good time to ensure registration before the transitional period expires.

Further information is available at:

http://ec.europa.eu/health/human-use/herbal-medicines/index_en.htm

World Veterinary Year kick-off

Vets play a fundamental role in the citizens' daily lives, by being involved in the management of heath hazards deriving from animal diseases and more widely in food safety related issues.

On the occasion of The World Veterinary Year of 2011, which marks the 250th birthday of the veterinary profession, the European Commission's Directorate-General for Health and Consumers (DG SANCO) is organizing a series of activities to highlight the role of "vets in your daily life": this is the slogan for the joint activities of the European Commission and the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE), aimed at celebrating the anniversary and highlighting the diverse role of veterinarians across the world.

Those initiatives were launched during the International Green Week in Berlin from 21 to 30 January, and will continue taking place, amongst others, at the Salon International de l'Agriculture in Paris from19 to 27 February and during the fourth edition of the EU Veterinary Week, organised in partnership with the Federation of Veterinarians of Europe (FVE) from 16 May 2011.

In brief

Consultation on potential health risks of food resembling chemical consumer products

The European Commission and the Scientific Committee on Consumer Safety (SCCS) have launched a public consultation on a scientific opinion on the potential health risks posed by chemical consumer products resembling food and/or having child-appealing properties. The consultation will run until 11 February.

Food-resembling and child-appealing chemical consumer products such as shower gels, shampoos, body lotions and soaps are common on the European market. These products resemble items of food and appeal to children because of their colour, appearance, smell or other characteristics. Such products may lead to consumers, especially vulnerable groups such as young children or the elderly, putting them in their mouths and swallowing them.

The two main reasons for asking the SCCS to assess the risk from accidental ingestion of food-resembling and child-appealing chemical consumer products are:

- The difficulty in determining their potential health risks due to the large number of elements to be taken into account. For example, the toxic properties of the ingredients and the probability of the product being confused with food and the amount ingested.

- The need for a common approach in the EU to the safety assessment of such products.

The draft opinion concludes that there is some risk of poisoning, in particular from household products. However, the lack of specific data on both the frequency and effects of accidentally ingesting this kind of products means that it is not possible to determine the risk level with certainty.

Gathering feedback on the scientific evidence and conclusions drawn by the SCCS is a key part of the committee's risk assessment procedure. Stakeholders are therefore invited to comment through this online consultation.

The online consultation is available at:

http://ec.europa.eu/health/scientific_committees/consultations/public_consultations/sccs_cons_02_en.htm

During the World Veterinary Year 2011, national veterinary institutions will also organise local events to raise public awareness about the importance of their profession and as a reminder that veterinarians have been serving humankind for 250 years.

Amongst the numerous initiatives taken, DG SANCO and OIE have decided to highlight the wide and varied role vets play in our daily lives through the production of six videos, showcasing the fundamental role of vets and their impact on people's life. The videos focus on six major themes: animal husbandry, pets, crisis management, food security, food safety and zoonoses.

All the videos are available at:

http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/health_consumer/information_sources/videos_ahw_en.htm

Second International Conference on Risk Assessment

The Second International Conference on Risk Assessment "Global Risk Assessment Dialogue" was organised by the European Commission's Directorate-General for Health and Consumers from 26 to 28 January 2011 in Brussels.

The Conference aimed at providing a Forum for global dialogue on risk assessment principles, methods, criteria, practices and arrangements in the various jurisdictions around the world. It was related to and builds upon the Transatlantic Risk Assessment Dialogue of the European Commission with the US and Canada. This was the second of regular, international bi-annual conferences on risk assessment, where the first edition took place on 13-14 November 2008.

The Conference was held over three days. The first day focused on the future of risk analysis and on consistency in risk assessment. The second day was organised in five break-out sessions, which tackled topics such as terminology, uncertainty and exposure assessment. The third day was dedicated to the first results of the dialogue and to the future of the global risk assessment dialogue.

Further information is available at:

http://ec.europa.eu/health/risk_assessment/events/ev_20110126_en.htm#fullwidth

Eradication of animal diseases programmes for 2011

Aiming at further strengthening the protection of human and animal health, the European Union earmarked more than €250 million to support programmes to eradicate, control and monitor animal diseases in 2011.

For 2011, 60 annual or multi-annual programmes to eradicate 8 important animal diseases will be granted Community financial support. The total EU contribution to these programmes will be around €135 million. Member States endorsed the

financial package proposed by the European Commission during the meeting of the Standing Committee on the Food Chain and Animal Health (SCoFCAH) of 12 October 2010.

Further information is available at:

http://ec.europa.eu/food/animal/diseases/financial/index_en.htm

EP news

Cross-border healthcare in the EU

On 19 January the European Parliament voted in favour of the EU Directive on patients' rights in cross-border healthcare.

"Today's vote marks an important step forward for all patients in Europe", European Commissioner for Health and Consumer Policy John Dalli declared.

"Patients will no longer be left in the dark when taking steps to avail of healthcare treatments abroad and to get reimbursed by their Member State of origin. This Directive clarifies the rights of patients, which until now have been unclear", said Françoise Grossetête MEP, EP Rapporteur on the Directive.

The Directive will benefit patients in several ways. It will provide a clear and coherent set of rules on cross-border healthcare, clarifying the patients' rights to access safe and good quality treatment across EU borders, and be reimbursed for it.

It will help patients who need specialised treatment, for example those who are seeking a diagnosis or treatment for a rare disease. Furthermore, the Directive will bring about closer and improved health cooperation, including the recognition of prescriptions, between Member States. Health experts across Europe will be able to exchange best practices and mutually benefit from innovations in health technology assessment and eHealth.

"I look forward to a swift implementation of this Directive by the Member States", Commissioner Dalli said. Once formally adopted by the Council, national governments will have indeed 30 months to integrate these measures into national legislations.

Further information is available at:

http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=MEMO/11/ 32&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=en

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