



Food quality labels: simpler rules for farmers, more clarity for customers

Committees: Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development

To help EU food producers to compete with imports from third countries, food quality labels must be made easier for producers to register and use to explain value added to customers, said the Agriculture Committee on Tuesday. The committee amended new draft labelling rules to reduce the time it takes to register a label, empower producers to do more to protect their products and allow an optional new label for mountain produce. Labels for island produce and farm gate sales may follow soon.

The proposed new legislation, on which Parliament co-decides with the Council, would provide a single set of rules for quality labelling schemes for foods such as fresh meat, cheese, beers, fruits, vegetables, oils, bread and pastry, etc - that originated in a given geographical area or were produced or processed in line with a traditional practice.

The new rules approved by the Agriculture Committee would also apply to dark chocolate and salt. "Light" and "low-fat" products would be eligible for optional labelling introduced by Member State on a voluntary basis. Wines and spirits would continue to be excluded.

Simplifying and strengthening current rules

To encourage more producers to register their agricultural, fishery and aquaculture products and foodstuffs and to enable customers to make more informed choices, the whole procedure must be streamlined and shortened, rules simplified and protection of registered products strengthened, argue MEPs.

The new rules would cut the time allowed for the Commission to respond to a request to register a label from 12 to just 6 months. The Committee also shortened the time allowed for raising objections.

Quality labelling schemes described

There are three EU-wide quality labelling schemes currently in use. The "protected designation of origin" (PDO) label is used for products produced, processed and also prepared in a given area - such as Parmigiano Reggiano, Shetland Lamb, Feta, and Roquefort.

The "protected geographical indication" (PGI) label may be used for produce and foodstuffs for which at least one production stage takes place in the specified region, e.g. Starobrnnéské pivo, Schwarzwälder Schinken, or Castaña de Galicia.

Producers using a recognised traditional method to make e.g. Vieille Kriek, Liptovská saláma, Kalakukko, or Prekmurska gibanica, may continue to use a "traditional speciality guaranteed" (TSG) label.

Stronger role for producers

Food producers' groups - i.e. any association of producers, processors or producer-processors - would be empowered to take measures to protect their proprietary names, improve the performance of the scheme and promote the authenticity and reputation of their products.

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To improve the functioning of the market, these groups would also be empowered to establish - in cooperation with and after endorsement of their Member State - a system for managing production of protected products, in other words - to "adjust" supply and demand. However, such arrangements must in no way harm competition on the single market or lead to small producers being adversely affected, MEPs stressed.

Compulsory EU logo

The EU symbols associated with the PDO, PGI and TSG labels must be made mandatory for all registered products originating in the EU, said the committee. These labels would have to appear on the product with the name of the label used and the product's registered name. In the case of the PDO and PGI schemes, a depiction of the geographical area of origin or a symbol referring either to the Member State or the region may also appear on the labelling.

Use of the EU logo will continue to be voluntary for products originating in third countries.

What does "traditional" mean?

The new rules provide for a complete overhaul of the "traditional specialties" label. Henceforth, MEPs amended the TSG scheme so as to safeguard not only traditional production methods, but also recipes. Produce and foodstuff producers applying for a TSG label will have to prove usage on a domestic market for two generations, i.e. 50 years - compared to the one generation (25 year) rule applied today. The committee inserted exemptions for old products and recipes which have been revived only recently. In such cases, the 25-year rule will continue to apply. Products which producers apply to register before the new legislation enters into force will be registered even if they do not comply with the two-generation rule.

No more nameless registration

The practice of registering a product for a TSG label without reserving a name, which provides publicity without protecting the name, must be abolished at EU level, said MEPs. Products that comply with the two-generation rule will be transferred to a new register at the request of the relevant Member State, using a procedure introduced by the committee, but others may continue to be registered only until 31 December 2017.

Mountain and island product labels

New optional quality labels (to be introduced by Member States on a voluntary basis) should be made available, said the committee, to enable mountain and possibly in future also island producers and local farmers to show consumers how they add value on the single market. MEPs therefore amended the Commission proposal to make a mountain product label available immediately for products processed in mountain areas or in areas close to them.

The committee also called on the European Commission to produce an impact study by 30 September 2012 on two other labels: "product of island farming" and a new scheme for local farmers whose produce is intended for direct sales. A legislative proposal may follow, if deemed necessary.

Next steps

The report, drafted by Iratxe García Pérez (S&D, ES) and approved in the committee with 33 votes in favour and 4 abstentions, will be put to a vote by Parliament as a whole at the September plenary in Strasbourg (26 - 29 September).

The Agriculture Committee will vote on the second legislative proposal of the food quality package, the regulation on marketing standards, at its extraordinary meeting in Strasbourg on 4 July.

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