



Q&A on the novel foods regulation

Background

On 29 March the final conciliation meeting on updates to novel foods rules failed after Council rejected a final compromise offer from the European Parliament. This means that the current Novel Foods Regulation, adopted in 1997, will remain in force. This is only the second case in which conciliation talks have not resulted in an agreement (the first was those on the working time directive).

The updates to novel foods rules aimed to ensure that innovation can continue in the food sector without compromising safety and consumer protection. The following questions and answers outline the European Parliament's role and some of the controversial issues at stake.

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Background

What are "novel foods"?

Foods may be considered "novel" if they are derived from new technological processes or if - as may be the case of an exotic food - they have no significant history of consumption in the EU. In either case, these foods are defined this way from 15 May 1997, when the EU introduced a novel foods regulation to ensure checks before approval for sale. Genetically-modified foods are regulated under separate legislation.

Background

What is the status of the update to novel foods rules?

In January 2008, the European Commission presented a proposal to update novel foods rules. The European Parliament and Council did not reach agreement on a final text after two "readings" (phases of discussion and voting) and a period of "conciliation talks". The main stumbling block was the question of food from cloned animals. Since negotiations did not end in agreement before the end March 2011 deadline, this legislative process has ended and the 1997 Novel Foods Regulation remains in force without any changes. In October 2010, the Commission indicated it favoured a temporary suspension of animal cloning for food production in the EU and would begin the process to propose legislation to that effect.

Background

Who is representing the Parliament in negotiations?

The European Parliament delegation is composed of 27 members. The Chair of the delegation is European Parliament Vice-President Gianni Pittella (S&D, IT). The rapporteur Kartika Liotard (GUE/NGL, NL) and Environment Committee chair Jo Leinen (S&D, DE) are also members.

Background

What is the European Parliament position on food from clones?

In Parliament's second reading vote, an overwhelming majority of MEPs said they did not want food products from cloned animals (or their descendants) to be regulated under novel foods rules. They wanted the Commission to propose separate legislation to prohibit such foods, and a moratorium to be introduced pending such a ban. These amendments were not supported by Council, which represents EU Member State governments.

Background

What do EU consumers think about food from clones?

A 2008 Eurobarometer survey of 25,000 EU citizens found that 58% of respondents considered cloning for food production to be "unjustified". 83% said foods from cloned animals should be labelled, if permitted for sale. 63% said it was "unlikely" that they would buy food derived from cloned animals.

Background

What are the objections to meat from cloned animals (or their descendants)?

European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) assessments have not suggested that meat or milk from cloned animals poses a risk to public health. However, MEPs object on animal health and welfare grounds, since a high proportion of cloned animals suffer from disease or malformations, or die prematurely. Concerns have also been expressed about ethical implications and the possible consequences of reducing the genetic diversity of farmed livestock, for example in resisting the outbreak of a disease.

Background

Is the sale of food from cloned animals allowed in the EU?

Under the novel foods regulation already in force, the sale of food from cloned animals (but not of its offspring or descendants) would require an authorisation. No application for clones has so far been submitted. Cloned animals are expensive to produce, and therefore currently present a commercial interest more for breeding purposes than for meat. In August 2010, meat from a bull bred in the UK from a cloned cow was sold and consumed.

Traceability in the global food and agriculture market is also an issue. Animal semen and embryos for breeding are traded internationally. A United States voluntary moratorium currently applies to the sale of food from clones, but not from their offspring. The US Food and Drug Administration has not introduced any labelling requirements for such products.

Background

Why is nanotechnology relevant to food?

The use of nanotechnology is an emerging practice in the food sector. At nano-sizes, materials can take on different properties. (Nanotechnology definitions vary, but the nano-scale refers to dimensions of less than one millionth of one millimetre.) Nano-ingredients have a number of possible applications, for example as anti-bacterial agents, or to alter flavour or colour.

Background

What measures do MEPs want on nanotechnology?

In their second reading vote, MEPs said further checks need to be developed and applied to adequately assess such foods for safety. MEPs also want food containing nano-ingredients to be labelled to inform consumers.