

PROFEL

PROFEL is the European Association of Fruit and Vegetable Processors, which represents through national associations more than 500 processing companies in 11 Member States of the European Union. The products represented include frozen, canned and dried vegetables, deciduous fruits, jams and fruit preserves and frozen fruit. The sector has a turnover of around €25 billion and provides employment for more than 80.000 people

The Covid-19 pandemic created huge challenges for the industry. The different lockdown measures put in place by all governments had immediate impact on the supply chains

Companies did their best to adapt to the new situation, in order to continue to provide nutritious, affordable, accessible and convenient food to consumers

We will present 3 examples of how the companies of our sector were or are still affected by the pandemic as well as the EU response to the specific problems

Seasonal Workers

During the spring and while governments were introducing measures to limit mobility like the closure of borders, the major concern of the industry was the expected shortage of seasonal workers for the harvesting season. Frequently, fruit pickers come from other countries, inside or outside of the EU like Albania and Morocco. The closure of borders threatened the ability of these workers to arrive to the places they were needed. The EU offered guidance on how the restrictions should be applied and seasonal workers in agriculture were recognized as essential workers. Therefore, they were allowed to cross borders and our crops were harvested.

Factory Employees

The EU has also offered guidance on issues like the safe return to the workplace, covering safety measures inside the working place. The guidance proposes strict measures to avoid infection in the work place but at the same time allows essential industries to continue working.

Currently, in Greece this is not taken into consideration. When a number of workers in a factory test positive for coronavirus, Civil Protection orders the complete closing of the factory for days. The order includes all functions of the company, even warehouses and logistics facilities. As a result, the factory cannot ship products to buyers, creating disturbances in food supply chains all over Europe.

Labelling

Another matter that demanded and received the direct attention of the EU was labelling. As scheduled before the pandemic occurred, on the 1st of April specific changes in rules for food labelling entered into force. Companies reported difficulties meeting the date due to Covid-19: suppliers had decreased or stopped activities and delays were encountered in every step of creating and producing compliant labels. In order to avoid ruptures, companies had to request reprints of “non-compliant” labelling they previously used.

Fortunately, there was discussion between Member States and the need for flexibility in the timeline of enforcement was recognized. This allowed companies to continue supplying their products smoothly and without disruptions.

Conclusions

Many practical problems were encountered throughout the whole supply chain, such as the availability and protection of workers including seasonal workers, factory conditions, logistical constraints and disruptions. The ability of the European Union to provide guidance and direction across its Member States is a great help in coping with these problems.

Most processing factories stayed open, under incredibly challenging conditions, and with great concern to assure safe circumstances and a safe working environment for staff.

The sector of preserved fruit and vegetables in Europe – as an essential sector – met increased consumer demand for safe, nutritious, long shelf life products. We managed this unprecedented situation successfully, making sure there was no shortage of our products in supermarket shelves across the E.U.

However, strict enforcement of the necessary COVID-19 hygiene protocols and processes continue to result in increased production costs.

The pandemic forced us all to reconsider our priorities. The priorities of economic activities and decisions need to be reconsidered as well. Our fast and easy access to adequate food should not be taken for granted. Thousands of workers and hundreds of companies are essential and therefore, as societies, we need to invest more in food production and the people working to produce it. Our sector calls upon retailers and consumers for a new appreciation for European processed fruit and vegetable products.