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**Norwegian response to DG SANCOs Consultative Document:
“Labelling: Competitiveness, Consumer Information and Better Regulation for
the EU”**

Introductory remarks

Over many years, Norway has actively taken part in the framing of European foodstuffs legislation. Hence, Norway is very pleased with DG SANCO's request for comments on the consultation document “Labelling: Competitiveness, Consumer Information and Better Regulation for the EU”. The prevailing labelling legislation is rather old and has been amended on quite a number of occasions. Consequently, Norway appreciates the need for a thorough examination of the legislation concerning the labelling of foodstuffs.

A copy of this letter has been sent electronically to the dedicated e-mail box SANCO-LABELLING@cec.eu.int, as requested by DG SANCO in the Consultative Document.

Norwegian comments on points 7-15 of the Consultative Document: “Strategic Goal”

The labelling of foodstuffs is an important way of providing information. However, a prerequisite for this to work is that consumers understand the information the labelling expresses. The labelling should both be as simple as possible and contain sufficient information. Getting this combination right is not easy. The labelling must be true and easy to understand, so that consumers will be able to make informed choices, and to this end the question of which information is necessary should be appraised.

Which pieces of information that should be comprised by mandatory and voluntary

labelling, should also be fully assessed.

In Norway's opinion, there should also be a discussion about whether, and for which areas, voluntary labelling guidelines should be drawn up. At present, the EU is about to complete a regulation on the use of nutritional claims and health claims concerning foodstuffs. As an example, Norway would like to suggest that something similar to this could be developed concerning symbol labelling and origin labelling, provided that agreement is reached that these two labelling arrangements should be voluntary.

Consumers often find labelling difficult to grasp because it contains too much information, is difficult to understand, confusing and poorly presented. Since 1997, on an annual basis, the Norwegian Food Safety Authority has conducted consumer surveys by telephone interviews to map out what consumers know about and their attitude to food safety – The Safe Food Surveys. These surveys include a number of questions about labelling. In quite a few of the surveys, consumers say they find the information about sell-by date, ingredients, fat content and additives most beneficial. The surveys also show that a large proportion of the population (60-65 %) read the labelling often or now and then.

Prevailing labelling legislation was laid down before the development of information technology. Norway believes that in addition to labelling the product per se, other channels of information should also be assessed, e.g. using barcodes in a scanner at the shop, the Internet, brochures, posters etc.

Any new labelling requirement should be based on what we actually know about the way labelling is used and understood and how other ways of providing information are regarded. Alternatives to labelling on the packaging should also be examined. Norway feels that what information should be on the product and what should be made accessible in other ways, should be examined thoroughly.

Labelling should also stimulate the industry to develop its products with regard to both health and quality. Norway therefore believes that the industry should be involved in discussions about developing new labelling legislation.

Norwegian comments on the “Common Themes” of the Consultative Document

Theme 1. Norway believes that the general/horizontal labelling directives should be incorporated into one directive. In addition, it may be necessary to retain labelling decisions in some vertical/special directives. References should be made to the general regulations in all the vertical/special directives, and vice versa where this seems appropriate.

Theme 2. Norway believes that the labelling legislation should be clear, understandable and allow room for the necessary transitional periods, thus inconveniencing small and medium sized businesses as little as possible.

Theme 3. Norway believes that any forthcoming mandatory labelling requirements must include all the mandatory labelling requirements applicable today.

Additional information should be included in other systems directed at consumers with special interests. For example, the barcode on the packaging could transfer information to a monitor/scanner in the shop, or information could be provided on the internet.

On this point, the EU should take the results of consumer surveys into consideration.

What do consumers want to know? How much information is too much? Which information do consumers use? Methods with which to reach lower socio-economic groups should also be evaluated.

Theme 4. Whether using logos or symbols might improve information to consumers should be assessed. Symbol labelling should never be the sole form of labelling. Symbol labelling will in some contexts be able to provide information additional to the mandatory labelling. Criteria for the use of symbols should be drawn up. Consumers will have to be taught what the symbols mean before they can be used in labelling. Symbol labelling will probably also reach consumer groups who do not usually read the text on the packaging.

Currently, a Nordic project initiated by the Nordic Council of Ministers is assessing whether it is possible to agree on common criteria for using symbols as nutritional labelling on foodstuffs.

Theme 7. Some Nordic consumer surveys on labelling have been performed. Norway supports labelling decisions being built on this kind of relevant research. This applies both to consumers' understanding and usefulness of the labelling, but also to claims (nutritional and health claims) used by the industry to market foods.

Theme 9. Labels are often difficult to read, and the space reserved for mandatory labelling is sometimes tiny in comparison to the producer's description of the products, illustrations, suggestions for use etc. In Norway's opinion, it could be beneficial to investigate further whether font size, use of contrast and colour etc could be standardised by law. Simple and accessible templates for labelling need to be developed. The advantages and possible disadvantages of the standardised presentation of labelling information ought to be looked into.

Consumer organisations have indicated that, without prejudice to clarity and legibility, it is important that labelling information is easily recognisable. A uniform, standardised presentation would help consumers find and understand information.

Alternative labelling templates could be developed which meet the basic demands of being visible, eye-catching, recognisable and so on, as well as containing all necessary

information. Templates could be developed by professional graphic designers, and food legislators. The text in this paragraph also concerns point 26.

**Norwegian comments on points points16-26 of the Consultative Document:
General labelling**

16. Norway supports revising the labelling legislation, old and extensive as it is.

18-19. Norway believes that today's applicable horizontal labelling legislation should be incorporated into one general/horizontal directive. In addition, should it be necessary, labelling decisions should be included in vertical/special directives. The horizontal regulation and the vertical directives should refer to each other.

20. Norway supports the suggestion that mandatory labelling requirements be incorporated into one regulation encompassing all prevailing mandatory labelling requirements. In Norway's opinion, product description, ingredient list, sell-by date, the producer's name and address/telephone number, net content, energy content and energy giving nutrients (protein, fat, carbohydrate) and all nutrients which have been demonstrated to have an adverse health effect, such as sugar and trans-fat, must be included in the mandatory labelling. In the mandatory ingredient list, all allergens should be included.

On a number of occasions, Norway has commented that Quid-labelling of added sugar should be made mandatory. The amount of added sugar in a product affects consumers' health, cf. the Joint WHO/FAO Expert Consultation Report on Diet, Nutrition and the Prevention of Chronic Diseases, 2003.

Consumers are interested in the shelf-life of products. Norway believes that it is just as important for consumers to know the packing date and the date of freezing as the estimated shelf-life. Both dates should be made statutory.

21. Norway believes it will be easier for consumers to understand the labelling if standardised mandatory labelling is drawn up. Consequently, wherever possible and relevant, the EU should formulate general guidelines for voluntary labelling due to:

- consideration of the consumer
- free flow of goods
- equal conditions for competition

21-24. Whether an ingredient's list on foodstuffs containing alcohol should be made statutory should be assessed, e.g. on alcopops, beer etc.

25. Norway still believes that guidelines for voluntary labelling should be drawn up, thus avoiding misleading consumers whilst at the same time promoting a level playing field for competition.

26. On this point, Norway would like to refer to the text in paragraph 'theme 9' concerning Common Themes.

Norwegian comments on points 27-28: Nutritional declaration

27. Decisions concerning statutory nutritional declaration labelling should be included in the horizontal labelling legislation, cf. point 20.

28. Quite often, consumers appear to wish to know the amount of energy, as well as the amounts of the various energy giving nutrients in a given product. Norway thinks that this information should be made subject to mandatory labelling requirements.

For many years, there have been discussions of whether these amounts should be stated per 100 grams, per 100 ml or per portion. Some claim that it is easier for consumers to understand indications per portion than per 100 grams. In discussions between countries, however, so far it has proven impossible to agree on definitions of portions for different foods. Norway is of the opinion that the most informative approach will be to state amounts per 100 gram or per 100 ml. In addition, Norway thinks that investments should be made to strengthen consumer information on this topic. Consumers should be helped to understand how much of a product is used in various meals or dishes.

Information concerning nutritional content, in addition to what is mandatory, may be stated via the food's barcode, scanning in the shop, brochures, poster information and the internet.

According to prevailing legislation, making a nutritional claim means that the nutritional contents must be declared. Norway thinks that this should still be so in any renewed general/vertical labelling requirements. Also, clear guidelines should be drawn up for voluntary nutritional declarations. The location of nutritional declarations should be the same on all foods, so that it will be easy for consumers to find/read.

Norwegian comments on points 29-32: Origin labelling

29. Consumers seem to show great interest in the country of origin of foodstuffs. The Safe Food Survey 2006 shows that Norwegian consumers are most interested in the country of origin of meat (72%), and second most interested in the country of origin of fish and eggs. According to this survey, the place of origin of processed products is of less interest, despite the fact that Norwegian consumers (37%) believe that the place of origin is the place of processing.

32. In Norway, guidelines for voluntary labelling of origin are presently being developed. If the EU should decide to make labelling of origin mandatory, Norway will

support this approach on certain conditions. Under prevailing law, labelling of origin is required for beef, as well as for fresh fruit, berries, vegetables and potatoes.

Norway believes that general mandatory labelling of origin should include the name of the country in question. Consumers do not appear to regard labelling the product as originating in the EU as sufficient; accordingly, the product should be labelled with the relevant member state's name.

With regard to origin labelling, the greatest challenge will probably be to frame clear and understandable guidelines for origin labelling of processed products. Norway thinks that such guidelines should apply to the entire EEA-area. If origin labelling is not made mandatory, Norway believes that guidelines should be drawn up for voluntary origin labelling.

Norwegian comments on points 33-36: Animal welfare labelling

33. Norway thinks that symbol labelling saying something about animal welfare should be assessed. However, this presupposes that consumers understand the use of such symbols.

Norwegian comments on points 37-40: GMO labelling

37. For many years, Norway has been involved actively in international endeavours to make labelling arrangements for GMO. Norway supports the EU's current labelling arrangements for GMO. Norway would like this regulation to remain an independent regulation.

Norwegian comments on points 41-42: Warning labels on alcoholic beverages

41. Warning labels might be an effective way of informing consumers about the detrimental effects of alcohol consumption. However, Norway would like to refer to the discussions concerning warning labels on alcoholic beverages which are going to take place in connection with the drafting of the EU's political strategy on alcohol. The pointing out of certain risk areas, without combining these with some kind of a general warning, may distort the information and consequently suggest that no other health risks are connected to the use of alcohol.

Norway will not necessarily dismiss all proposals of restricted warning labels on alcoholic beverages. However, Norway will stress the importance of considering the contents of such restricted warnings very thoroughly.

In general, Norway agrees that such warning labelling will be in accordance with the requirements stemming from article 31 of the EC treaty, which require that such measures be proportional and well-founded.

Norwegian comments on points point 43-45: Non-food labelling

43. As far as the labelling of cosmetic products is concerned, Norway believes it advantageous to keep labelling decisions for this product group to separate legislation. When inspecting cosmetic products, Norway considers it easier to relate to one specific regulation which applies to this product group alone.

So far, Norway has not been able to consider labelling of other special product groups (detergents, paints, do-it-yourself, toys, electronic appliances).

Miscellaneous Norwegian comments

Ethical labelling

Norway has taken part in a number of Nordic projects on ethical labelling. Different questions regarding this topic have been discussed. Two reports cover these discussions: TemaNord 2004:532 and ANP 2004:741. The ongoing Nordic projects aim to compare different ways of informing consumers about ethical conditions concerning the production of foodstuffs (symbols, different databases, brochures etc). Reports on this are expected in the course of 2006.

Appendix

This table shows an overview of Norway's comments

Theme	Labelling on the product	Mandatory (M)/Voluntary (V)	Information in places other than on the product	Remarks
General Food Labelling	Product description	M	Other info can be found by consumers in the shop (via barcode, brochure etc) or on the Internet	Since 1997, the Norwegian Food Safety Authority has conducted an annual Safe Food Survey. These surveys show that consumers find information on shelf life, ingredients list, fat content and additives most useful.
	Amount	M		
	Ingredients list	M		
	Shelf life date/packing date	M		

Nutrition Labelling	Nutritional declaration	M*		
	Symbol labelling	M/V		Ongoing Nordic project on symbol labelling in attempt to work out common criteria for use of symbols on food. If symbol labelling is not made statutory, guidelines/legislation should be formulated for use of symbols on foodstuffs.
Origin labelling		M/V		If the EU would suggest statutory origin labelling, Norway would support this. If there is no agreement on this, Norway believes that guidelines/legislation should be formulated for use of voluntary origin labelling.
Welfare labelling		V		Assess symbol labelling
GMO labelling		M		Norway supports the prevailing EU legislation in this area.
Health warning on alcoholic beverages				Norway believes it necessary to consider the contents of specific warnings very thoroughly.
Ethical labelling of food		V		Nordic reports: TemaNord 2004:532 and ANP 2004:741
Cosmetics	Separate legislation	M/V		Labelling decisions for cosmetics should not be incorporated in the labelling decisions for foodstuffs

* Product description, ingredients list, shelf-life, producer's name and address, net contents, energy contents and energy-giving nutrients (protein, carbohydrate and fat) and nutrients which have been demonstrated to have a detrimental effect on health.

Yours sincerely,

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