

Action Plan

# Action Plan for the Consumer Orientation of Food Policy 2004- 2005



**ACTION PLAN  
FOR  
THE CONSUMER ORIENTATION  
OF FOOD POLICY  
2004 – 2005**

Ministry of Agriculture and Food,  
Ministry of Fisheries and Coastal Affairs,  
Ministry of Health and Care Services,  
in co-operation with  
Ministry of Children and Family Affairs

# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1. Background

To have consideration for consumers means to strengthen the consumers' position in the market place with regard to information, labelling and other rights. Through consumer orientation of the food policy, one wishes to create a better balance between consumer interests and business interests, in other words between what is supplied and what is demanded in the market place. Whilst the supply side consists of professional, well-organised and well-funded stakeholders, the demand side consists of private persons. The information which is available as the basis for consumers' choice can be very limited and poorly focused on the consumers' real information needs. To refrain from purchasing a product is not a very relevant market signal, and not sufficient in order to protect consumers' rights when the product or service is inadequate. The individual consumer has limited resources to influence what is supplied in the market place.

Various food scares in the 1990s, the debate about genetic modification, and greater focus on food safety, honest trading and increased diversity are all issues which have had attention in the public sphere. These issues indicate major changes in the market place which have been inspired by i.e. changes in the international markets, production conditions, consumer attitudes and new technology.

Consumers, both as private persons and groups, have to a greater extent become important agenda instigators in the public debate about food. Consumers have become more aware. Many travel abroad and experience other qualities and varieties of products which give new terms of reference. At the same time one must remember that consumers in different markets and countries may have various preferences and demand different things from food. As a result, this has led to a greater need, from the perspective of the authorities, for dialogue with consumers and consumer representatives in the food area.

The objectives of this action plan are to strengthen consumers' opportunities to influence the development of food policy, and through information strengthen consumers' opportunities to make an informed choice based on personal preference, whilst at the same time strengthen consumers' confidence in food.

## 1.2. Fundamental consumer considerations in food policy

A fundamental consideration in food policy is that food is *safe* with regards to health. This implies that the food shall not cause sickness or damage to health amongst consumers. This consideration must be ensured throughout the chain of production to the consumer.

Consideration for *honesty* involves food products being described accurately. This implies that consumers must not be misled regarding the food's origin, processing, type, quantity, ingredients, production method or other issues which can have an influence on the consumers' ability to make an informed choice.

Consideration for *quality* can be linked to consideration for health and honesty, but is also an independent consideration. Consumers demand that food satisfies quality parameters such as taste, smell, texture and appearance. In addition, food production methods and origin will for

some consumers be considered as quality parameters of the foodstuff. In this context consideration for the environment and ethics will be relevant.

A *diversity* of food products should give consumers access to a varied and adequate diet which satisfies their nutritional needs, and which has consideration for the great variety of specific preferences. Consumers may have needs for information regarding special health and nutritional aspects of the food, preferences for a documented production method or documented origin. Special consumer preferences can be associated to i.e. animal welfare, environment, culture, religion and ethics. Product information should as far as possible cover the product aspects of interest to consumers. The authorities cannot demand diversity but can stimulate diversity through ensuring that products which are produced in a special way or have special qualities, can obtain an official and regulated mark which indicates this. Regulations should not be more detailed than necessary, in order that they do not limit product development and diversity.

It is also important to consider that food is produced in a *sustainable way* which is environmentally friendly and contributes to maintaining biological diversity.

### 1.3. Communication with Consumers

One of the objectives of the authorities' communication with consumers concerning the food area is to encourage consumer confidence in food. Food products shall both be safe and be perceived as safe. Food products shall also satisfy consumers' expectations based on the image of food products in the market.

In order to stimulate consumer confidence in food, it is important that the authorities are transparent and maintain good communication with consumers. Norwegian authorities have for a long period pursued an active dialogue with consumer organisations and have given financial support to their participation in international forums. This has been a part of long term work where information, communication and consumer organisations' participation in the development of regulations has been central. Consumers shall be assured influence through information, transparency and involvement.

It is an aim of the authorities that consideration for consumers is a constant consideration throughout the whole food chain from farm and fjord to fork. It is at the same time a prerequisite that consumers have confidence in all parts of the food chain, as well as the enforcement authorities. Such confidence should also exist between the various parts of the production and distribution chain, between industry and the authorities and between consumers and the suppliers. To ensure confidence in the enforcement authorities, it is important that they are transparent and independent.

The main points in this action plan are consumer information and involvement of consumers.

- *Consumer information* is reliant on knowledge held by the authorities about consumer needs, attitudes, knowledge and preferences. Equally important is building knowledge amongst consumers about important food policy issues. In addition, the authorities must ensure that consumers receive the necessary information to be able to make an informed choice regarding the food they eat.
- *Involvement of consumers* involves a dialogue with consumers, and ensuring that consumers are represented and may participate in forums where food policy is developed.

#### **1.4. Directives for consumer orientation of food policy**

The general food policy is described in St.meld. nr. 40 (1998-1999) "Concerning consumer policy and the organisation of the consumer institutions" (White Paper). In the summer of 2002 the Greenland Declaration was approved by the Ministers for food from the Nordic countries. At the same time, a Nordic action plan for strengthening consumer influence in the food area was approved. In the autumn of 2002 the Norwegian parliament approved the establishment of a merged Food Safety Authority, ref. St.prp. nr. 1. Addition nr. 8 (2002-2003) (Parliamentary Bill). The Food Safety Authority was established 1 January 2004. In the autumn of 2003, a proposal for a new law on food production and food safety was approved by the parliament, ref Ot.prp. nr. 100 (2002 – 2003) (Legislative Bill). Directives for food policy can also be found in St.meld. nr. 16 (2002 – 2003) "Prescription for a healthier Norway" (White Paper). All these directives have made it natural to develop a common action plan for the consumer orientation of food policy.

#### **1.5. Action plan – What and for whom?**

There is a need to involve consumers more in the development of food policy by establishing a better dialogue between the authorities, consumers and producers. The authorities will through this action plan describe initiatives to ensure that consumer interests are given more weight.

Through the establishment of the Food Safety Authority, for which the Ministry of Agriculture and Food, the Ministry of Health and Care Services and the Ministry of Fisheries and Coastal Affairs are responsible, it has been necessary to come to a clear common understanding of terms, and clarify which goals, actions and resources that are required to strengthen consumer influence in food policy. This action plan has been developed in co-operation with the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, which is responsible for general consumer policy.

The Food Safety Authority will be a central body in the implementation of the measures which are described in this action plan. The Food Safety Authority's management tasks are detailed in St. prp. nr. 1 Addition nr. 8 (2002 – 2003) (Parliamentary Bill), which include:

- Enforcement of regulations concerning food production throughout the chain both at sea and on land
- Enforcement of regulations concerning import and export of plants, animal feed, live animals and food products
- Enforcement of regulations concerning plant and animal health
- Enforcement of regulations concerning influencing factors in land based and water based food production
- Management of drinking water
- Enforcement of regulations concerning cosmetic products
- Animal protection and animal welfare
- International work
- Civil emergency measures
- Enforcement of regulations concerning animal health personnel who prescribe medication and chemicals which influence food safety
- Assistance to municipalities with environmental health protection

- Active communication, including risk communication to the general public about the authority's evaluations and results

This action plan will only concern the Food Safety Authority's responsibilities within the management of food.

Norwegian food is available to consumers in many countries. It is not possible to involve all these consumers in the development of Norwegian food policy, although the basic consumer requirements will be the same as in Norway. It will therefore be useful for the authorities to keep themselves updated on the activities of BEUC<sup>1</sup> at a European level and CI<sup>2</sup> at an international level. Such an approach will also make it easier to strengthen consideration for consumers in the development of standards and regulations concerning international trade in food products. It is further necessary to have knowledge about various preferences, needs, attitudes etc. With regards to seafood, it is necessary for the Food Safety Authority to co-operate with the Norwegian Seafood Export Council in order to ensure mutual exchange of information and synergy of each other's work.

This action plan builds upon the initiatives which are already carried out as part of the work with the Ministry of Agriculture's<sup>3</sup> action plan for Consumer Orientation 2001-2003. The main prioritised areas in this action plan have been co-ordinated through a board<sup>4</sup> and has resulted in the following projects:

- Establishment of food policy consumer panels

Seven consumer panels in seven counties discuss food policy and give advice and recommendations to the authorities.

- Establishment of the Food Portal

The Food Portal is an Internet portal which contains consumer orientated information regarding food policy with a focus on food safety.

- Consumer orientation of the enforcement authorities

The main aim with this project is that the consumer interest in enforcement of regulations concerning food shall be deeply rooted in the enforcement authorities. A report was available early in 2004.

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<sup>1</sup> Bureau Européen des Unions de Consommateurs

<sup>2</sup> Consumers International

<sup>3</sup> The Ministry of Agriculture changed its name to the Ministry of Agriculture and Food on 1 October 2004.

<sup>4</sup> The board had representatives from the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Fisheries, the Food Control Authority, the Animal Health Authority, the Agriculture Enforcement Authority and the Consumer Council.

## **2. GOALS AND STRATEGIES**

In order to achieve the main goals of strengthening consumers' opportunities for influencing the development of food policy, and in so doing provide information to stimulate consumers' confidence in food, the Ministries prioritise the following goals and strategies:

### **Goal 1: Contribute to consumers having a good knowledge within the food area**

- Provide active information directed at consumers through various channels
- Focus particularly on young people by adapting the information for use in schools
- Continue the work on risk analysis, with particular focus on risk communication

### **Goal 2: Ensure that the authorities have knowledge about what consumers know, think, wish and do**

- Contribute to the collection of knowledge and communication of consumers' wishes and needs to the food authorities.
- Contribute to the continuation of consumer research.
- Ensure that knowledge about international markets and international consumers is communicated to and acted upon by the food authorities.

### **Goal 3: Establish a comprehensive and uniform enforcement authority which protects the interests of consumers**

- Clarify and establish a uniform understanding of the role the Food Safety Authority shall fulfil
- Ensure that the Food Safety Authority's values are understood by all employees in order that discretionary power is applied in accordance with common guidelines when meeting consumers, enforcement objects and society in general
- Make allowances for increased consumer influence by establishing a culture for prioritising non-regulatory activities in the form of dialogue conferences, meeting places, internet etc.
- Ensure that there is sufficient competence at all levels of the Food Safety Authority

### **Goal 4: Contribute to transparency and dialogue between authorities, industry and consumers**

- Make allowances for consultations with consumers and industry as a part of policy and regulatory development, possibly when the various parties are present at the same time
- Contribute to the publication of the authorities' conclusions and enforcement results and to making them easily available to the public
- Continue the work with risk analysis and ensure a good, comprehensive and understandable risk communication
- Ensure that appropriate arenas are established for dialogue with consumer organisations and consumers directly
- Contribute to financing consumer participation in national and international forums

### 3. ACTIONS

The actions named shall contribute to the achievement of the goals named in the action plan. To ensure maximum achievement, the actions will be reviewed during the plan period. The Ministries will consider both additional actions and changes to the current actions, in co-operation with the Food Safety Authority.

#### **Goal 1: Contribute to consumers having a good knowledge within the food area.**

##### **Related actions:**

- Further develop the Food Portal to become the consumers' most important source of information concerning food safety
- Ensure the development of an Internet page for youth about food safety, with information about food from farm and fjord to fork.
- Clarify and communicate to the consumers the roles of and the division of authority between the three Ministries, the Food Safety Authority and the Scientific Committee.
- Evaluate the need for changes to the mandatory labelling of food, in order to ensure that consumers get appropriate information about the products.
- Evaluate the need for voluntary food labelling schemes.

The Food Portal is an Internet portal with information about food safety directed towards consumers and was established in May 2003. The Food Portal shall be current and have a width and depth of information which profiles the whole food chain. Further work is required to ensure that the Food Portal is the source of information which consumers choose for information regarding food from farm and fjord to fork.

Young people are an important target group. The Ministries wish to increase the knowledge about food and food safety amongst young people through information available on the Internet. This will be done in co-operation with academic environments and other current projects on the subject, and must be seen as complimentary to the work on strengthening teaching about food and food safety generally.

The Scientific Committee for Food Safety shall carry out risk evaluations throughout the whole food chain. It shall carry out independent scientific risk evaluation on behalf of the Food Safety Authority, and can also undertake cases on its own initiative. Clarification of the roles and responsibilities of the Ministries, The Food Safety Authority and the Scientific Committee is a challenge for the authorities, which must be followed up both internally and externally in relation to consumers, in order to build up their competence and assure that consumers can have confidence in the system.

In order for consumers to have the necessary knowledge, it is a prerequisite that consumers are given information about the food they buy. This is necessary in order for consumers to make informed choices. Such information can be given through mandatory labelling of food. The authorities must continually evaluate the need for such labelling. This must be seen in the light of the development of standards and regulations internationally.

Voluntary labelling schemes can also be considered in addition to mandatory labelling of food. Several voluntary schemes exist today, for example Godt Norsk (Good Norwegian) and a labelling scheme for protected geographical indications. Through such labelling schemes the authorities can provide for information about production and quality requirement compliance



to consumers. The Ministries will evaluate both the need for new labelling schemes and changes to the existing labelling schemes.

## **Goal 2: Ensure that the authorities have knowledge about what consumers know, think, wish and do**

### **Relevant actions:**

- Review and carry out “The Safe Food Survey”<sup>5</sup> in addition to devising a method which will enable the communication of the results to the food administration, industry stakeholders and the public in general.
- Impart knowledge to all parts of the food administration based on the findings of Norwegian Monitor<sup>6</sup> and other relevant surveys and make the results available to all interested parties.
- Instigate a co-operation between the Food Safety Authority and the Norwegian Seafood Export Council, in order to enable the exchange of knowledge about Norwegian and international consumers’ opinions and wishes associated to fish as food.
- Participate in the Nordic Council of Ministers’ work with following up the Ministers’ resolution on ethical labelling of foodstuffs.

A prerequisite to strengthening consumer participation in the development of food policy is that the authorities obtain the necessary knowledge about consumers’ wishes, opinions and behaviour connected to central food policy issues. Such knowledge is obtained through the collection of knowledge in our surroundings (surrounding world analysis) amongst others by using traditional surveys, special analysis and media surveillance. This knowledge must be made available internally and externally and be used actively in the development of strategy and choice of resources in the short and long term.

An important task for the future connected to surrounding world analysis is to include data which are already available from other sources. The Norwegian Agricultural Economics Research Institute (NILF) and the Directorate for Health and Social Affairs co-operate on analysis of food consumption. The National Institute for Consumer Research (SIFO) also has relevant projects. The Ministries have as a goal to co-operate with various research institutes on a project basis, in order to increase the food administration’s understanding of the outside world, particularly with respect to the consumers’ preferences in the food area.

Norwegian food is sold to consumers in many countries. It is therefore necessary to obtain knowledge about the wishes and needs of international consumers. The Norwegian Seafood Export Council obtains a lot of such information. The Food Safety Authority and the Seafood Export Council should exchange information regarding the seafood area, in order to draw benefits from each other’s knowledge.

The Nordic Ministers for food adopted a ministerial resolution about ethical labelling of foodstuffs in June 2003. A range of actions, to obtain further knowledge about consumers’ opinions and wishes regarding ethical information concerning food products, were proposed

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<sup>5</sup> “The Safe Food Survey” is a representative survey which is undertaken regularly. The survey measures people’s knowledge and attitudes associated to safe food and confidence in food control

<sup>6</sup> Norwegian Monitor is a considerable nation wide representative survey which is carried out every two years. It includes i.e. questions connected to the food area to which the authorities need answers.

in the resolution. Norway will participate actively in the Nordic work concerning the collection of knowledge and contribute with information about Norwegian consumers' views concerning ethical labelling.

### **Goal 3: Establish a comprehensive and uniform enforcement authority which protects the interests of consumers**

#### **Relevant actions:**

- Following up the project "Consumer orientation of the enforcement authorities", based on the conclusions in the final report from the project.

The project "Consumer orientation of the enforcement authorities" was completed in 2003. The final report was available at the beginning of 2004. The future following up of the project will be based on the recommendations in the final report. This follow up will be related to the consumer orientation of the Food Safety Authority.

### **Goal 4: Contribute to transparency and dialogue between authorities, industry and consumers.**

#### **Relevant actions:**

- Ensure that risk evaluations, proposals for risk management and enforcement results are made quickly available to the public via each of the stakeholders' web pages.
- Strengthen the administration's knowledge about risk communication and ensure that the communication is appropriate.
- Have direct dialogue with consumers through the implementation and evaluation of the project "Food policy consumer panels"
- Implement the project "Consumer participation in national and international forums"
- Establish various forums for dialogue where key issues can be discussed before decisions are taken.

Publication and freedom of information are central democratic rights which contribute to increased competence and give consumers greater influence. Good risk communication and transparency concerning findings is the basis of maintaining consumers confidence in the food administration.

There is a need for particular focus on risk communication as a central part of the risk analysis. Risk communication involves all stakeholders in the food chain. Therefore, there is a need to establish an infrastructure to ensure the necessary co-operation for risk evaluation and risk management. It is equally important to have competence concerning how information should be given and how it is understood by the various stakeholders. Awareness about these processes has been the theme at two Nordic training courses in 2003. This work will be followed up by the food administration in the action plan period, both internally in the administration and in co-operation with industry and consumer stakeholders.

In 2002 seven food policy consumer panels were established in various parts of Norway. These panels discuss food policy and give advice to the authorities through direct dialogue with the political leadership in the ministries. The political leadership in the Ministries have committed themselves to listening to the panels' advice, and in the event that this advice is not

followed in the development of policy, to explain why the advice is disregarded. At a midway point, the project will be evaluated.

It is desired that consumer organisations be represented in national and international forums where questions regarding food policy are discussed. There will be a project aimed at strengthening consumer participation in such forums.

It is important to establish meeting places where the stakeholders are invited to discuss various issues. Such meeting places will help to enable dialogue between consumers<sup>7</sup>, industry and the authorities.

#### **4. ORGANISATION OF THE WORK**

A resource group consisting of representatives from the Ministry of Agriculture and Food, the Ministry of Health and Care Services, the Ministry of Fisheries and Coastal Affairs and the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs has been established. In the future work with consumer orientation, this resource group will have a co-ordination role at a ministerial level. It will have particular responsibility for following up the consumer panel project because of this projects' political basis. The Food Safety Authority will have the operational responsibility for other measures in the action plan and will report to the hierarchy. The resources which are required to complete the action plan will be described at a later stage in a resource allocation letter to the Food Safety Authority. Directions regarding prioritisation of the authority's work will also be described in the said letter.

#### **5. EVALUATION**

As part of the completion of the action plan, it is necessary to carry out an evaluation of goal achievement and work process.

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<sup>7</sup> Consumers' interests in the food area may be represented by various consumer organisations.

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