

Food Traceability in Europe: Consumers' Knowledge and Perception

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Nowadays, the accurate and timely traceability of food products and activities in the supply chain is a factor of competitiveness in agribusiness. Increasingly, consumers demand for verifiable evidence of traceability is deemed to be an important criterion of food product quality/safety. This trend seems to be based on the demand for food products with well-identified origin, the high incidence of food-related hazards and the still important concerns over the impacts of GMOs on human health and environment. In order to meet consumers' demands as well as rebuild public confidence in the food chain, the design and implementation of full backward and forward traceable supply chains from farm to end-users have become an important part of the overall food quality assurance system and are now mandatory everywhere in EU since 1st January 2005.

In the framework of the EU research project TRACE, a large survey was conducted in 2005 on consumers' perception of food traceability in Europe by means of 24 focus groups involving 240 consumers and covering France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Norway, Malta, Slovenia, Poland and Lithuania. The first findings indicate that food traceability is rather a new topic for most of consumers, although starting to be known in very fuzzy terms from mass media. Consumers often confuse traceability and origin, and barely consider safety or products withdrawal. They have difficulties to express a positive willingness to pay for traced products. They declare paying attention to information upon the product. However, a paradox exists between a request of more information and the overload of information on food labelling.

The logos and meanings of European food quality labels (PDO and PGI) are not well known by consumers, they are more identified at a national level. The Region-of-Origin effect seems more important than the Country- one's, although the last is still operating in some countries.

The knowledge of and the expectations towards traceability vary according to the country, even if remaining quite vague. In some countries, a label or a logo is declared as sufficient for the guarantee of traceability; in others, more information is expected on origin, while in some others the way of production, ingredients and compliance with safety measures during the process are required. Food traceability is not perceived with the same level of expectations in each country. A systematic insight based on multifactorial analysis of textual data extracted from the recorded verbatim of all focus groups, using SPSS software, gives interesting segmentation between European countries with respect to consumers' perception of food traceability.

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