

# Food Traceability



Tracing food through the production and distribution chain to identify and address risks and protect public health

Food safety has been a growing concern among EU citizens over the last decades. Outbreaks of disease in animals that could be transmitted to humans, or the presence of chemicals above acceptable limits in feed and food, can threaten both the quality and safety of products.

Traceability is a risk-management tool which allows food business operators or authorities to withdraw or recall products which have been identified as unsafe. It is a cornerstone of the EU's food safety policy.

## CONTEXT AND NEED FOR EU ACTION

### 1. What is "traceability"?

- Under EU law, "traceability" means the ability to track any food, feed, food-producing animal or substance that will be used for consumption, through all stages of production, processing and distribution.

### 2. Why is traceability needed?

- Traceability is a way of responding to potential risks that can arise in food and feed, to ensure that all food products in the EU are safe for European citizens to eat.
- It is vital that when national authorities or food businesses identify a risk they can trace it back to its source in order to swiftly isolate the problem and prevent contaminated products from reaching consumers.

- In addition, traceability allows targeted withdrawals and the provision of accurate information to the public, thereby minimising disruption to trade.

- Past food crises, such as dioxin contamination and BSE, have illustrated the particular importance of being able to swiftly identify and isolate unsafe foodstuffs in order to prevent them from reaching the consumer.

### 3. The importance of EU-wide action

- Since the internal market means that food and feed products circulate freely between EU countries, traceability can only be effective if common requirements are met across all Member States.

## THE EU'S ACTIONS

### Legal framework

- The EU's General Food Law entered into force in 2002 and makes traceability compulsory for all food and feed businesses. It requires that all food and feed operators implement special traceability systems. They must be able to identify where their products have come from and where they are going and to rapidly provide this information to the competent authorities.
- The EU has published guidelines (available on the European Commission website) which require business operators to document the names and addresses of the supplier and customer in each case, as well as the nature of the product and date of delivery. Operators are also encouraged to keep information on the volume or quantity of a product, the batch number if there is one, and a more detailed description of the product, such as whether it is raw or processed.

### Specific requirements

- In addition to the general requirements, sector-specific legislation applies to certain categories of food products (fruit and vegetables, beef, fish, honey, olive oil) so that consumers can identify their origin and authenticity.
- There are also special traceability rules for genetically modified organisms (GMOs), which ensure that the GM content of a product can be traced and require accurate labelling so that consumers can make an informed choice.
- In the case of animals, producers must now "tag" every one with details of their origin and, when animals are taken for slaughter, stamp them with the traceability code of the abattoir. The tools used (ear tags, passports, bar codes) may vary from one country to another but must carry the same information.

### The traceability system in action: clear roles and responsibilities

The food and feed production chain often involves many steps, from the import or primary production of a product to its sale to the final consumer. At every stage, food and feed businesses, Member State competent authorities and the EU have clearly defined roles and responsibilities and need to respond appropriately when a risk is identified.

	Overall responsibilities	Actions taken when a risk is identified
Food and feed businesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify and document information on products "one step forward and one step back" in the food chain.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Immediately withdraw the affected products from the market and, if necessary, recall them from consumers.</li> <li>• Destroy any batch, lot or consignment of feed that does not satisfy food safety requirements.</li> <li>• Inform the competent authorities of the risk and of the action it has taken.</li> </ul>
Member State authorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monitor production, processing and distribution of food and feed products to ensure that operators have traceability systems in place.</li> <li>• Fix and enforce appropriate penalties for operators that do not meet EU requirements on traceability.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure that operators are meeting their obligations.</li> <li>• Take appropriate measures to secure food safety.</li> <li>• Trace the risk backwards and forwards along the food chain.</li> <li>• Notify the Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed (see box).</li> </ul>
The EU	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establishes sector-specific legislation on traceability as appropriate.</li> <li>• The Food and Veterinary Office of the European Commission carries out regular inspections to ensure that food and feed operators are meeting food safety standards – including the implementation of traceability systems.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The European Commission alerts members of the Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed of the risk.</li> <li>• Requests information from operators to enable traceability and coordinates action by national authorities.</li> <li>• May impose import/export restrictions.</li> </ul>

### A concrete case: dioxin contamination in potato peels, 2004

In autumn 2004, during standard random monitoring of dioxin levels in milk at a Dutch farm, national competent authorities found a high level of dioxin. They immediately barred the farm from trade, and initiated the tracing of the product through the food chain. This revealed that the source of contamination was clay, used in food processing to separate high quality potatoes from lower quality ones. The dioxin-contaminated clay had contaminated potato peels used for feeding animals. The RASFF (see box) was

used to trigger the swift exchange of information between national authorities on the problem. It was quickly established that the clay had also been supplied to several food processing companies located in The Netherlands, Belgium, France and Germany. Authorities swiftly identified these businesses and barred over 200 farms, which had received the potentially contaminated potato peels, from trading. Thanks to the traceability system, action was taken in time and contaminated products never reached the consumers.

## EXAMPLES OF TRACEABILITY TOOLS AND LABELS

### ■ Sheep and goat tag, Lithuania



- Initials of the Animal Recording centre (Agriculture Information and Rural Business Development Centre)
- Country code
- 6-digit individual animal identification number

### ■ Cattle passport, Germany



- Date of issue
- Ear tag number
- Origin
- Name and address of owner

### ■ Label on beef steak, Belgium



- Traceability bar code
- Country where animal was born
- Country where animal was fattened
- Country where animal was slaughtered

### ■ Label on oranges, Belgium



- Origin
- Category
- Weight
- Traceability code

## The Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed (RASFF)

The RASFF network, in place since 1979, was enhanced by the General Food Law in 2002. Members of the network are the 27 Member States, the European Commission, the European Food Safety Authority, Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway. This warning system supports the traceability system by enabling the rapid exchange

of information whenever a risk to food or feed safety is identified. If a member of the network becomes aware of a potential risk to human health, it notifies the European Commission, which immediately transmits this information to the other members – and beyond – so that corrective action can be rapidly taken.

## TRACES: A community system to manage animal movements and prevent the spread of animal diseases

To enable the traceability of animals across borders, in April 2004, the EU introduced the TRAdE Control and Expert System (TRACES). This provides a central database for tracking the movement of animals both within the EU and from third countries. In the event of a disease outbreak, TRACES ensures that all potentially affected animals can be quickly identified and that authorities can take appropriate measures.

> <https://sanco.ec.europa.eu/traces>

## EXAMPLES OF EU FUNDED PROJECTS

- The EU is providing almost €12 million to the 5-year **TRACE project**, which kicked off in January 2005. Supported by over 50 European organisations and one from China, the initiative will deliver integrated traceability systems, guides to traceability best practice, and food verification systems, specifically in the mineral water, chicken, meat, honey and cereal sectors.  
> <http://www.trace.eu.org>
- **FoodTrace** is an EU programme which began in 2002 and is designed to enhance traceability procedures between businesses. It seeks to establish a clear identification system and a network of databases so that information can be centralised and shared.  
> <http://www.eufoodtrace.org>
- The EU carried out an analysis of its existing animal health policy between 1995 and 2004, in order to identify future policy options. This covered several aspects related to intra-Community trade, including traceability. As a result of the evaluation, the EU is promoting a gradual move towards **integrated electronic identification and certification procedures** for intra-Community trade in its 2007-2013 Community Animal Health Strategy.  
> [http://ec.europa.eu/food/animal/diseases/strategy/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/food/animal/diseases/strategy/index_en.htm)

## FURTHER INFORMATION

- **DG SANCO website on Food Safety**  
[http://ec.europa.eu/food/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/food/index_en.htm)
- **The Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed**  
[http://ec.europa.eu/food/food/rapidalert/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/food/food/rapidalert/index_en.htm)
- **The General Food Law is available on the DG SANCO website**  
[http://ec.europa.eu/food/food/foodlaw/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/food/food/foodlaw/index_en.htm)
- **Guidelines on the Implementation of Traceability**  
[http://ec.europa.eu/food/food/foodlaw/guidance/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/food/food/foodlaw/guidance/index_en.htm)
- **TRACES**  
[http://ec.europa.eu/food/animal/diseases/animo/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/food/animal/diseases/animo/index_en.htm)

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