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EVU information

Veggie definition: 7 years of inactivity by the European Commission

*“7 years ago, the EU Food Information to Consumers Regulation (FIC) stipulated that the European Commission is to issue an implementing act defining requirements for information related to the suitability of a food for vegetarians and vegans”, says **Felix Domke**, the European Vegetarian Union’s (EVU) Head of Public Affairs. Despite growing pressure from politicians, consumer organisations, and the food industry, the Commission has failed to act upon this responsibility in the past seven years. “It is incomprehensible why the Commission - despite a clear mandate for action - lets consumers, producers, and retailers wait, all of whom would benefit from clear regulations”, says **Domke**. To this day, legally binding definitions of the terms “vegan” and “vegetarian” do not exist at EU level and only sporadically on member state level. The European legislator recognised the need for a reliable definition, resulting in its inclusion within the FIC in 2011.*

Support from REFIT and European Food Industry

After years of intensive lobbying by the EVU, the European Commission has committed to preparatory work on the definition starting in 2019 in its working programme for 2018. This was accomplished after the EVU filed a submission at the REFIT platform, which advises the Commission on effective regulation. The submission was backed by the Stakeholder- and Member State committee and consequently approved. REFIT shared EVU’s opinion that the Commission needed to act soon and recommended putting the topic on the agenda. While it is still a disappointment that works will not start in 2018, it is now a clearly stated objective that 2019 will see a Commission draft, deliberations in the Standing Committee and the adoption of the implementing act that will become an important symbol for recognition of vegetarian interests by the law.

However, with regards to the elections, a new College of Commissioners and Brexit coming up in 2019, political pressure has to be kept up in order to remind the Commission of its duty to finally establish the implementing act laying out criteria for legally-binding definitions.

Additionally, the EVU collaborated with the European food industry, represented by its umbrella organisation FoodDrinkEurope, and agreed on a joint proposal for a definition, creating widespread support among all relevant stakeholders.

Success at member state level

In reaction to the inactivity of the European Commission, there have been efforts on member state level. In Germany, the European Vegetarian Union’s German affiliate ProVeg Germany (former VEBU) achieved an important milestone in April 2016, sending a strong signal to Brussels:

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The consumer protection ministers of the German federal states unanimously voted in favour of a proposal for a legally binding definition of the terms “vegan” and “vegetarian”. The ministers backed a wording that had been consensually developed by a working group consisting of the federal states, the German food industry, and ProVeg.

The proposed definition is based on criteria developed by the EVU, is backed by its member organisations, and fully meets the expectations of interested customers. The German consumer protection ministers put it into effect for the food control authorities under their jurisdiction. The German government and all the political parties in the German Bundestag have voiced their support for the timely adoption of a legally binding definition by the European Commission. In April 2016, former German Federal Minister of Food and Agriculture Christian Schmidt sent a letter to EU Commissioner Vytenis Andriukaitis, expressing the urgent need for an implementing act and recommending the German definition proposal.

Clarity by means of V-label

Reliable labelling of vegan and vegetarian food products is currently only offered by the V-label of the EVU. Its criteria are accepted by international vegan and vegetarian organisations. The increasing dissemination of the V-label testifies both to the trust consumers put in it and to the advantages that retailers and producers gain from its deployment. More than 800 firms in Europe currently use the V label on thousands of products. Notable licensing partners include Aldi, Alpro, Ben & Jerry, Coop, FrieslandCampina, Griesson de Beukelaer, Migros, Spar and Unilever.

The Food Information to Consumers Regulation

On 25 October 2011, the legislative process for the Food Information to Consumers Regulation was concluded. The FIC, decided upon by the European Parliament and the Council, stipulates that the European Commission is to issue an implementing act defining requirements for “information related to suitability of a food for vegetarians or vegans” (Article 36(3)(b) Regulation (EU) No 1169/2011). This signifies an obligation to decree a legal definition of the terms “vegan” and “vegetarian” for the labelling of foods. Furthermore, the regulation recognises that food labelling should put consumers in a position where they can make their food consumption decisions on the basis of health, environmental, social and ethical considerations (recital 3).

For further background information, please consult the EVU’s position paper on <http://www.euroveg.eu/public-affairs/food-information-regulation/> and contact the EVU’s Head of Public Affairs, Felix Domke (jan-felix.domke@euroveg.eu; Tel +49 30 29028253-41).

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