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EU Response to Coronavirus

The EU has been supporting and coordinating national action to help limit the spread of the virus and providing aid to tackle the social and economic impact of this outbreak. To this end, some money from the EU budget has been made available, and many rules have been relaxed to allow national authorities to adopt measures to support businesses facing economic difficulties. Addressing the specific needs of the agri-food sector, the European Commission has proposed introducing additional flexibility and simplification in the use and management of existing funds, including the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), that will allow farmers to benefit from loans or guarantees to cover operational costs at favourable conditions. In addition, the rules of other Common Agricultural Policy instruments have been relaxed to allow for a reduction of physical on-the-spot checks and leeway for timing requirements. Higher advances of direct payments (from 50% to 70%) and rural development payments (from 75% to 85%) will also be available for farmers from mid-October.

Border management in the EU

In order to limit the spread of the virus, many EU Member States have implemented restrictions and border control measures that risk destabilizing the Single Market. Border management remains a national competence, but the EU has set out some recommendations in an attempt to bring about a coordinated approach to those measures, ensuring the availability of goods and protect the integrity of supply chains in this challenging context including the creation of priority lanes (“green lanes”) to enable freight transport so the supply of essential products such as foodstuffs and medicines is guaranteed. Guidelines to ensure the free movement of essential workers (including food manufacturing and processing and related trades and maintenance workers; food and related products machine operators; and transport workers) and guidelines to facilitate Air Cargo Operations were also put forward. In a further attempt to ease trade, the EC has also approved a Regulation on temporary measures for member States to perform official controls on the agri-food chain in a simplified manner allowing for additional flexibility in the performance of official controls in case of a shortage of staff or other difficulties arising from movement restrictions for people.

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Brexit

The first round of negotiations on the UK-EU future relationship took place at the beginning of March. However, the COVID-19 outbreak has had an impact on Brexit, with Michel Barnier himself testing positive for the virus, which has led to a change in the planned schedule. The EU has published its draft legal proposal and the UK has also submitted a draft proposal for a free trade agreement (not publicly available) to the EU, so both teams are analysing each other's offer and keeping informal exchanges. However, formal negotiations have been paused for now until "COVID-19 is settled". In such a context, there is a growing sense that a delay of the transition period is inevitable, despite the continuous reassurances by the UK that that is not on their plans (yet). Meanwhile, the first meeting of the EU-UK Joint Committee – in charge of monitoring the proper implementation of the Withdrawal Agreement – did happen as planned, with the EU calling on the UK to set out its plans for the implementation of the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland (IE/Ni), including necessary measures such as preparing for the introduction of customs procedures for goods entering NI from Great Britain, and ensuring that sanitary and phytosanitary controls and other regulatory checks can be carried out for goods from outside the EU. In addition, the EU has been updating its Brexit readiness notices, including the one on live animals, that now addresses specifically the landbridge (movements EU-UK-EU of live animals and animal products).

EU Farm to Fork Strategy

The disruption caused by the coronavirus outbreak has led the EC to postpone the publication of its Farm to Fork strategy to the end of April 2020 (it was initially planned for March 2020), with European farmers calling for a further postponement due to mounting pressures faced by the sector in the current context. While we will have to wait until the official publication to know the exact scope of the strategy, several draft versions have been leaked to the press indicating that the EC will look at specific targets for the reduction of use of pesticides and fertilisers and an increase in the EU's organic farming area by 2030. The strategy will also aim at facilitating the placing in the market of innovative feed additives that contribute to reduce methane emissions in farming and at replacing some critical feed materials (i.e. soya) for more sustainable alternatives (i.e. insects, marine feed stocks and by-products from the bioeconomy). Labelling will be another key aspect with the introduction of mandatory front-of-package nutrition labelling and origin labelling for milk and for meat and milk used as ingredients

Antimicrobial resistance in the EU

The latest EU Summary Report looking at the status of antimicrobial resistance in bacteria affecting humans, animals and food, published annually by the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), shows that Salmonella and Campylobacter are becoming increasingly resistant to ciprofloxacin, a concerning development as this is one of the antibiotics of choice for treating infections caused by these foodborne bacteria. In food-producing animals however, the report includes some positive findings showing encouraging progress in reducing antimicrobial resistance in several EU Member States over the last years but EFSA's chief scientist has stressed the need to further investigate the reasons behind this change.

Animal Welfare

The EC has opened a public consultation on the EU Strategy for Protection and Welfare of animals 2012-2015. The feedback received will be included into an external study to support the evaluation of the Strategy launched in 2019 to assess the extent to which it had delivered against its objectives and whether those objectives are still relevant today. The evaluation will inform any future EU initiative on animal welfare as well as actions under the EU's Farm to Fork Strategy. The public consultation will remain open until the 15 June 2020.

Residues of veterinary drugs

The European Food Safety Agency (EFSA) has published its report for 2018 on the presence of residues of veterinary medicinal products and certain substances in live animals and animal products in the EU. It shows high rates of compliance with recommended safety levels in the EU, with only a 0.3% of the samples exceeding the maximum levels. This figure is within the range of 0.25-0.37% reported over the previous 10 years, but slightly below the 0.37% reported in 2017. Non-compliance increased slightly for antithyroid agents and steroids as compared to 2017. Small decreases were noted for antibacterials, other veterinary drugs (such as non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs), and other substances and environmental contaminants (such as chemical elements and mycotoxins). A total of 657,818 samples were checked by the EU Member States (including the UK, as data refers to 2018) in the framework of the residue monitoring.

Rift Valley fever

EFSA has published a scientific opinion on the risk of introduction of Rift Valley fever to Europe. While the EU is not at imminent risk from this disease affecting humans and animals (including sheep and cattle), developments in neighbouring countries mean that the EU authorities and Member States should strengthen, improve and harmonise their surveillance and response capability as well as their scientific and technical expertise to be better prepared. The Rift Valley fever is a vector-borne disease transmitted by a wide range of mosquito species and it is endemic in sub-Saharan Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. The publication of this opinion by EFSA follows recent outbreaks in a French overseas department and the detection of seropositive cases in countries close to Europe, which have raised the possibility of incursion into the EU territory.

US-China Phase One Agreement

The US Department of Agriculture and the US Trade Representative have informed about additional progress in the implementation of the agriculture-related provisions of the US-China Phase One Economic and Trade Agreement that entered into force in February 2020. Among the recent activity, China has expanded the type of beef and pork products eligible to be imported from the US and removed all references to age restrictions for beef. China has also accepted maximum residue levels for three hormones commonly used in US beef production, benefiting US beef exports, and both parties have signed a regionalisation agreement for highly pathogenic avian influenza and virulent Newcastle disease, an interesting development taking into account the long-standing EU's claim for China to recognise regionalisation for African Swine Fever, something China has - at least up to now - refused to do.

EU 2030 climate ambition

The EC has opened a new public consultation on the EU's 2030 climate ambition to gather stakeholders and citizens views on the desired ambition level of climate and energy policies, the necessary actions in different sectors and specific policy design to increase the EU's climate ambition by 2030. The feedback received will then be taken into account in the design of a comprehensive plan to increase the EU's 2030 climate target. The plan will be published in September this year and the EC will also put the new target into EU law through an amendment of the recently proposed European Climate Law and through sectoral legislative proposals. The consultation will be open until the 23 June and inputs in the form of position papers, policy briefs, sectoral roadmaps and studies are also welcomed.

CAP impact on biodiversity & water

The EC has published a long-awaited study carried out by external consultants and looking at the impact of the CAP instruments and measures on biodiversity, together with another study looking at the impact of CAP on water quality. Both studies acknowledge the contribution of the EU framework to set higher ambitions for both areas and to ensure a baseline of rules and standards. However, they also identify some important shortcomings. Both studies highlight that CAP's contribution highly depends on Member States' implementation, so priorities and choices vary significantly from one Member State to the other. Specific recommendations in each area are suggested in both reports to inform policy design at all levels (also national and local) and implementation.