

“EAT WELL, FEEL GOOD”

Unified EU Programme to boost children’s fruit, vegetables and milk consumption?

5 February, Brussels - Following the publication of the Commission’s legislative proposal for the merger of the School Fruit Scheme (SFS) and the School Milk Scheme (SMS) (1), and while welcoming the Commission’s recognition to address poor nutrition of and to fight against obesity among European schoolchildren, Freshfel Europe and the European Public Health Alliance (EPHA) call on the Council and the European Parliament to defend the identity and the objectives of the SFS and not jeopardise its achievements.

Whilst acknowledging the Commission’s intention to take stock of the effectiveness of the educational measures of the SFS and to roll them out onto the SMS, both associations fear that such a lumped programme might potentially mean a loss of identity for the fruit and vegetables scheme. Addressing agricultural market competitiveness, disconnection of consumers from agriculture or price volatility could be better achieved through an alternative framework.

The Commission’s proposal brings a number of welcomed features: it refocuses the distribution of products onto *fresh* fruit and vegetables; enhances the involvement of *national health authorities* in products selection and authorisation; and reinforces the *educational dimension*. However, there are issues that might be detrimental to the schemes - in particular to the SFS - and the health benefits it promises (2):

- The merge is premature. Given the changes that have yet to be implemented to the SFS through the CAP reform (i.e. an increase in the budget and the inclusion of several new aspects in the co-financing), any further modifications to the SFS should wait until the current improvements are put into practice, consolidated and monitored.
- During the consultation process, it was confirmed that there are significant differences between the two schemes. The aims and objectives of the SFS and the SMS widely differ, as do the health benefits and the related communication. Considering a greater integration of these schemes would hinder any consensual communication efforts and will put into question the high level of health protection of children, one of the primary objectives of the SFS. This does not exclude the possible logistical synergies in handling the two schemes, but this is already possible today at EU Member State level.
- The flexibility in moving the earmarked funds between the schemes (although ‘only’ up to 15%) might require performing an assessment of its potential impacts, as we fear a tendency to move funds from fruit and vegetables towards milk distribution may occur – not because of greater demand for the latter but because of the still relatively under-developed networks of production and distribution for the former (being it just in its 4th year of operation, as compared to over 30 years of existence of the school milk supply chain).
- The efficiency and success of a school programme can only be guaranteed if its objectives are clear and well-targeted. Efficiency is closely linked to simple and well-defined objective/messages. Diluting SFS messages would weaken the scheme and the efficiency of accompanying measures. Monitoring and controls will become difficult. When launched, the SFS was built on the basis of increasing fruit and vegetables consumption together with a clear health objective. In addition, the SFS evaluation’s findings – in stark contrast to the SMS – have proved to have contributed to *“changing eating habits while increasing the fruit and vegetables consumption, it affected other nutrition related shortages (i.e.; low*

carbohydrate and fibre intake), created an additional demand for fruit and vegetables which had a great impact on the associated market and strengthened partnerships and coordination between sectors such as education, health and agriculture”.

Philippe Binard, Freshfel General Delegate, stated that *“in a time of stagnating fruit and vegetables consumption, it is important to have well-structured, well-funded and efficient policies”*. Peggy McGuire, EPHA President, added that *“from a public health perspective, the EU’s School Fruit Scheme presented an excellent example of health in all policies. It demonstrated that well-targeted public investment pays off by promoting healthy diets in those for whom we should care about the most – our children. Of course, we could always do more and better, provided the change is to serve good purpose and not just to cut the amount of red tape”*.

- **Contact information**

Dorota Sienkiewicz, EPHA Health Equity and Policy Coherence Coordinator (d.sienkiewicz@epha.org)
Raquel Izquierdo de Santiago, Freshfel Director Food Law, Nutrition and Health (Raquel@freshfel.org)

- **Notes to the editor:**

- (1) COM(2014) 32 final: Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and the Council amending Regulation (EU) No 1308/2013 and Regulation (EU) No 1306/2013 as regards the Aid Scheme for the Supply of Fruit and Vegetables, Bananas and Milk in the Educational Establishments. Available at http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/school-scheme/legislative-proposal/com-2014-32_en.pdf
- (2) EPHAC response to Consultation on the Review of the CAP Schemes providing agricultural products to school children. Available at www.epha.org/a/5708