



Food Matters

**Food and Consumer Protection
- The Food Chain's Responsibility -**

**Agriculture
Industry
Trade / Craftsmen
Retailers**



Bund für Lebensmittelrecht und Lebensmittelkunde e.V. (BLL)
(German Federation for Food Law and Food Science)

Food and Consumer Protection

– The Food Chain's Responsibility –

- I. Food Safety
- II. Agriculture
- III. Processing (Industry, Trade/Craftsmen, and Caterers)
- IV. Retailers
- V. Organic Products/Conventional Foodstuffs
- VI. Consumer Information
- VII. New Technologies and Novel Foods
- VIII. Organisation of Consumer Protection in Germany and Europe
- IX. The Social Responsibility of the Food Chain

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German Federation for Food Law and Food Science (BLL):

- Leading umbrella organisation for the German food chain
- Members include associations and companies in industry, retailers, trade/craftsmen, agriculture, as well as professional consultants
- Discussion partner in the field of science, law, politics, and economic matters
- Information centre for the food chain on national and international level

A series of crises, the last of which was BSE, has left the consumer feeling deeply insecure. This has led politicians to call for a new political approach with regard to consumer protection. The food chain represented by BLL, has adopted the following positions in this context:

I. Food Safety

Food safety has top priority at all stages of the food chain (from agriculture to industry and retailers). In the first instance, producers and companies of the food chain are responsible for food safety and accept this responsibility. The government has to provide the legal framework and the controls. Food safety is a constant challenge for the food chain – a challenge that the food chain confronts head on – and entails continuous adaptation to new scientific findings and frequent reviewing its “own activities”.

Food safety can only be achieved in the European single market through joint efforts. Thus the food chain demands European solutions for the legal framework. In view of the increasing trade in foodstuffs world-wide, food safety is also dependent on international standards. Much greater commitment by the European Union and its Member States is necessary at an international level to establish such standards.

II. Agriculture

The primary task of agriculture, including farming and livestock husbandry, is and remains ensuring food supply.

Despite controversial public debate, the size of a farm is not a decisive factor for sustainable management and for good animal welfare. Thus the BLL urges that unjustified polarizations of terms such as “industrial agriculture” or “factory farming” be avoided.

Transporting animals is a necessary component of the production system. It is in the interest of farmers to reduce transportation to a minimum, to keep distances and travel times as short as possible and to improve conditions of transportation.

Farmers apply and develop innovative techniques to limit the use of fertilisers and pesticides to an absolute minimum.

Farmers also draw up their own quality management systems, e.g. for meat, and thus assume responsibility for their part of the food chain for continuous product assurance “from farm to fork”.

III. Processing (Industry, Trade/Craftsmen, and Caterers)

Conditions in modern society make commercial processing of food indispensable to meet consumers' demands for a varied, safe, constant, high-quality and cost-effective supply of food products. Differentiation between unprocessed (“positive”) and processed (“negative”) food is completely unwarranted. Both kinds of product are requested by the consumer and, therefore, have their own legitimate position on the market.

Therefore, the BLL demands that governmental measures aiming at re-orientating demand and restrictions to advertising be ceased.

Today's food supply can only be assured by dividing up labour throughout the food chain, which, along with the consumer's desire for foodstuffs from all over the world and not just from his own region, necessitates the transportation of food. The food chain is operating efficient transport and commodity management aimed at reducing costs and ensuring noticeable positive impacts on the environment.

IV. Retailers

Whether food comes from a region or from elsewhere in the world, retailers play a crucial role in food supply marketing. As part of the food chain, retailers are responsible in their area of influence for safety and quality.

German consumers focus on price as a key factor, which has promoted competition and resulted in a uniquely low price level in Europe. However, food safety is always guaranteed. The preconceived idea: "special offers at the cost of safety", is neither correct nor substantiated. Safety will never depend on a certain price level - safety is not negotiable.

However, it is not possible, over and above food safety and quality, to satisfy every demand for lowest price. If the consumer makes further demands about the production of a foodstuff, which go beyond the actual product quality, e.g. in connection with animal welfare or environmental protection issues, then the consumer must be prepared to pay for it. Surveys already show that the consumer is willing to spend more money on food produced this way. It remains to be seen whether these surveys will be reflected in actual consumer demand.

V. Organic Products/Conventional Foodstuffs

Organically produced foods are not just niche products; they are well established with some consumers. And on the market place, they must find acceptance just like conventional products. The German logo for organic products has been designed to help the consumer recognise this product group, no more, no less. However, the logo for organic products should not give rise to false expectations. Organic products and conventional foodstuffs do not differ in terms of food safety and their contribution to proper health. The difference is in the cultivation methods and livestock husbandry.

The BLL demands that authorities and science give factual information on organic products and do not raise expectations that will prove to be disappointing to the customer. The BLL encourages greater scientific attention to be paid to organic products, their possible differences, benefits but also drawbacks compared to conventional food.

In general, the BLL does not consider it necessary to establish a government-subsidised quality logo for conventional foods¹.

¹ On the other hand, in the meat sector a quality logo could contribute to restoring consumer confidence if it were to indicate to the consumer that the production had been safeguarded throughout the entire chain.

All food products have to be safe and must prove their quality and find acceptance on the market. There is no room for interference by authorities. Such a regulatory policy would be wrong.

VI. Consumer Information

The consumer is the market partner of the food chain. To be able to make his or her own responsible purchasing decision, the consumer must be able to get information. The most important source of information is a clear and comprehensible label.

The BLL urges that a revision of the labelling legislation, aiming to simplify and ease the consumer's understanding, be undertaken. In addition to the label that will continue to carry the most important information, other (information technology) ways must be used to make specific information available to the consumer that cannot be provided by means of the label.

The prerequisite for the usefulness of information is a certain basic knowledge on the part of the consumer. Here, considerable improvement of consumer education "on all food-related matters" is needed.

The BLL demands that improvements in consumer education and information be tackled jointly by government, science, consumer organisations and the food chain. Only a well-informed consumer is in a position to make an independent and informed choice. Confidence grows from knowledge and the capability to form one's own opinion.

VII. New Technologies and Novel Food

Innovation is indispensable for the further development of food safety and quality. Hence, the food chain is in favour of new methods in food production. This includes the responsible development of novel food and the application of genetic engineering. Nonetheless, the current reticence of consumers towards genetically engineered foods has to be respected.

The BLL demands a regulatory framework in Germany and in Europe which addresses the necessary safety issues, proper consumer information and practical implementation in the food chain and by official food control authorities.

Development and application of advanced technology – including genetic engineering - must not be impeded by disproportionate conditions.

VIII. Organisation of Consumer Protection in Germany and Europe

At European and German level, efficient structures for "risk assessment", "risk management" and "risk communication" are needed. The food chain welcomes the establishment of an independent scientific European Food Safety Authority. It also demands that the German Federal Government likewise establishes a corresponding authority as a generally recognised scientifically competent centre, independent of "lobbying" and politics, which provides scientific advice and scientific support for politicians and authorities.

Furthermore, improved co-ordination of the protection of consumer health between the German Federal Government and the German Federal State Governments is needed. This also includes the maintenance of an efficient system of crisis management for potential problems and crises in co-ordination with the European institutions, in which the food chain and consumer organisations are involved.

IX. The Social Responsibility of the Food Chain

At all levels, the food chain recognises its total responsibility for supplying the public with a broad range of safe and high-quality food products.

To ensure this, the food chain

- makes great efforts to ensure the efficient operation of quality management systems
- constantly strives to improve safety measures in collaboration with scientists
- reacts immediately to new scientific findings on possible health hazards

- co-operates with decision-makers and authorities to establish proportionate regulations and to ensure efficient official food controls
- conducts comprehensive market research to understand the consumers' demands and to adapt its food products and product ranges appropriately
- fights unfair competition and thus contributes considerably to consumer protection
- condemns criminal activities of individuals who harm the entire food chain.

The food chain recognises the necessity to increase its dialogue with the consumer and with consumer organisations. It will meet the consumers' expectations for quality in all their diverse facets and will enter into dialogue about existing fears of and reservations about today's food supply and its production. In this context, the food chain must explain better how it operates. Concerns can only be eliminated via constant dialogue.

The objective of the food chain must be to offer the consumer not only the safe and high-quality food that he or she demands, but also to provide the assurance that the confidence in a product's safety and quality is deserved.

Arising from this responsibility, the food chain urges and encourages open dialogue with politicians, authorities, science, and consumer organisations.