

Currently it is the proclaimed aim of the European Commission to simplify and clarify the existing Community law. As a matter of fact, regarding the considered subject, a more accessible and clearer, codified version of the Directive on foodstuffs intended for particular nutritional use is currently proposed for adoption before the European Council and Parliament. For the purpose of transparency such codification efforts would also greatly be appreciated on Spanish soil and seem in particular necessary for the coordination of the Spanish regulations on foodstuffs intended for particular nutritional use and the provisions for foods intended for energy restricted diets for weight reduction.

Among other aspects, especially the individual vote that was filed contrary to the majority decision of the Provincial Court of Madrid seems remarkable, since it reveals the general concern regarding the sensitive field of dietetic foods. In the context of the growing awareness of health issues and sensitiveness on nutritional behaviour, the controversies, which emerged, reflect the potential and unresolved conflict of claims in advertising that especially associate health with weight loss. It remains to be hoped that once the proposed European regulation on health and nutrition claims is finally adopted by the Council, such conflicts and uncertainties will be resolved in a more satisfying way. *Mónica Weimann Gómez*

## Sweden

### Stricter food labelling requirements ahead?

The Swedish Minister for Agriculture, Food and Consumer Affairs recently presented a fresh survey showing that half of the food products on the Swedish market lack a proper declaration of origin. This has prompted the government to call for stricter labelling legislation.

The study<sup>1</sup> – which was commissioned by the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Consumer Affairs – covers 300 plus products sold by the largest retail suppliers of consumer foods. It reportedly exposes severe deficiencies in the labelling of food products on the Swedish market. According to the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Consumer Affairs, the ini-

tiative for the study was taken in response to mounting concern among consumers that the origins and contents of their daily supermarket staples are becoming increasingly anonymous.

These concerns are confirmed by the study. None of the large food suppliers escape criticism.

A general conclusion is that mandatory labelling information is often incomplete and poorly systematised. Contents are sometimes stated in grams, sometimes in per cent. In many cases the text is miniscule and difficult to read. Information is often displayed in different places on the packaging, making it hard to locate.

No more than approximately half of the products with an obvious main ingredient were found to be labelled with unambiguous information concerning the origin of that ingredient. For example, 56 % of fish stick products, fish au gratin, and canned tuna lack information on catch areas, while approximately 40 % of meat, cured meat and processed meat products lack clear labelling informing consumers of the primary product's origins. In some cases information on origin is absent altogether, while in other cases several alternative origins are stated. Without proper denotation of the country of origin, information on manufacturing country and manufacturer may be of little use, as the primary product may originate elsewhere.

The study distinguishes between retail-brand products ("RBP") and supplier-brand products ("SBP"). The study finds no basis for concluding generally that the labelling of SBP is better than that of RBP. For example, the labelling of the examined RBP consistently stated the manufacturing country, while, with a few exceptions, it did not state the manufacturer. The examined SBP, on the other hand, were better at stating the manufacturer, but lacked information concerning the manufacturing country. The survey indicates that the labelling of low-price RBP is somewhat poorer than that of higher priced RBP. The labelling in budget retail stores, moreover, is worse than in other stores.

The Minister for Agriculture, Food and Consumer Affairs – Ann-Christin Nykvist – considers

1 The study is available in Swedish on the website of the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Consumer Affairs: <http://www.regeringen.se/sb/d/1473>.

2 See article in Dagens Nyheter (a leading Swedish daily morning newspaper), 27 June 2006

the results of the study as proof that suppliers and retailers do not sufficiently prioritise giving clear, simple and well-arranged labelling information.<sup>2</sup> The Minister considers the results of the survey to be especially troubling since correct labelling is vital in order to enable consumers to make informed choices and accurate comparisons between different brands. In the case of fish products, the Minister notes that the lack of information on catch areas is particularly unfortunate, since many consumers wish to make informed choices due to concerns that important fish populations are threatened by extinction.

On the government's instruction the Swedish National Food Administration ("NFA") has launched

a nationwide supervision scheme focusing on misleading labelling. The NFA has furthermore been given the task of drawing up a proposal for new rules on origin labelling for beef in restaurants, school meal kitchens, staff restaurants and the like.

The NFA's proposals are to be presented on 1 February 2007, with a view to being adopted in the summer of 2007.

The Minister has summoned representatives of the food industry and the main food retail chains to talks on labelling issues and hopes to receive assurances of improvement. If self-regulation fails, stricter legislation may lie ahead.

Further developments will be covered in future Sweden country reports in EFFL. *Petter Holm*