

Chairman, Honourable Members,

I am very pleased to appear once again before this Committee – and very much welcome this opportunity for a constructive dialogue and exchange of views in the context of the Commission's Annual Policy Strategy for 2009.

This dialogue serves two essential purposes:

- First, it enables **me** to set out the key elements of my programme.
- Second, it offers **you** the chance to provide feedback on the various initiatives.

The comments and opinions of this Committee are greatly valued and appreciated, and will of course be taken into consideration in developing the Commission's Legislative and Work Programme for 2009.

Before commenting on specific policy initiatives, I should first re-affirm to the Committee the Commission's commitment to engage in comprehensive and effective **dialogue and consultation** in pursuit of our aim to deliver **better regulation** through increased attention on **activity planning** and **timely achievement of priority actions**.

Effective dialogue at an early stage is the key to ensuring high quality input to this process.

The **key strategic objectives** defined by the Commission at the start of its mandate – promoting prosperity, solidarity, freedom and security, and a stronger Europe in the world – remain the core direction for the Commission's work.

Since coming into office, the current Commission has delivered, or is in the final stage of delivering, major initiatives to meet these objectives – to move the European agenda forward and to confirm the role of the EU on the world stage.

As you will know, some of the important initiatives of the 2007 and 2008 Work Programmes will be delivered this year.

One issue of particular of interest to this Committee is cross-border healthcare – a proposal for which is now planned for adoption by the Commission in June. I will return to this a little later.

Also planned for presentation in the second part of this year are:

- the so-called "Health safety package" that includes Patient Safety and Healthcare associated infections;
- a Green paper on the EU Health Force;
- a Communication on European action in the field of rare diseases; and
- a Directive on quality and safety of organ donation and transplantation.

2009 will of course be a transitional year in many respects. The Parliamentary term will draw to a close and many of you will be seeking re-election next May. It will also, of course, be final year of this Commission's mandate.

In view of these circumstances, the Commission will have tabled most of its major outstanding legislative initiatives in 2008.

For 2009, our priority will be to work closely with Parliament and Council towards reaching agreement on the most important pending proposals.

We will also focus on making sure the *acquis* is being properly implemented and will take a forward look to lay the foundations for the years ahead.

The APS for 2009 therefore focuses on shaping what has already been agreed as regards delivery and implementation, rather than on proposing new legislation.

The APS includes as a Key Action envisaged for 2009 a Communication on **animal welfare labelling**.

This will cover various options for indicating animal welfare related information on products of animal origin, in relation to a broader communication strategy on animal welfare to consumers, and assess different options for establishing a Community Reference Centre for the protection and welfare of animals.

As mentioned in the chapter on "Putting the Citizen First" of the APS, we will in the area of public health, put forward a number of initiatives as part of the EU Health Strategy.

Food safety, animal health and animal welfare will be the subject of new proposals, and monitoring activities will be stepped up to ensure compliance with existing standards in these areas.

The key initiatives planned for 2009 in policy areas within my portfolio, and which are of central interest to this Committee, fall mainly under the security objective of the Commission.

We will continue the work on the **Implementation of the Animal Health Action Plan** and increase audits and inspections by the FVO to ensure consistent, effective and coherent implementation and enforcement of existing Community legislation.

We are planning to report on the **food hygiene package** which would review the experience gained from the application these measures, and, if appropriate, be accompanied by relevant amending proposals.

A **Communication on Cancer** – another key interest for this Committee and indeed for me – will present a European strategy to support Member States in their efforts to combat this disease. An important element of the strategy will concern information and guidance for citizens and health professionals.

I would also mention:

- the Strategy and second action plan (for 2010 to 2014) on combating **HIV/AIDS** in the EU and our neighbourhood;
- a Communication setting out EU actions to support Member States in tackling **inequalities in health**.
- another Communication will pave the way towards a framework for sustainable cooperation on **Health Technology Assessment** between the Health Services of the Member States;
- Finally, we are planning a Recommendation on **mental health**.

Chairman, I would like to devote the remainder of this address to three specific issues – cross border healthcare, food labelling and novel foods.

### Cross border healthcare

The initiative on patients' rights in cross-border healthcare is very important. I am pleased to confirm that this will be part of the broad social agenda to be adopted by the Commission in June, which will promote access, opportunities and solidarity for all EU citizens.

This proposal has occupied much of my time since taking office. I am well aware of the sensitivity of this initiative and the fact that it has raised some concerns – many of which I think are based more on perception rather than on reality.

I am sure we all support the principle of improving legal clarity and transparency on an existing right under the Treaty. I am also sure we all support the objective of improving patients' access to healthcare.

In preparing the proposal I have had very useful discussions with Honourable Members of this house, with Ministers and with my Commissioner colleagues.

The forthcoming proposal will represent a carefully balanced package, on the one hand, enabling patients to exercise their rights and, on the other hand, safeguarding the financial sustainability of the national health systems.

The directive would promote increased cooperation between national health systems which would serve to improve the overall quality of healthcare for all citizens. This should be our common goal.

## Food labelling

Turning to the proposal on food labelling, the general provisions would remain the same.

To help the consumer to easily read food labels, we propose that mandatory information should be printed in a minimum size (3mm), with a significant contrast to the background.

We propose to make information on certain nutritional elements **mandatory on the front of the pack** for nearly all processed foods.

The rules on the voluntary declaration of the country of origin or provenance of foods would be clarified.

To help people who suffer from food allergies or intolerances, we seek to extend the provision of **information on allergens** to foods sold loose through shops or restaurants or other mass caterers.

Alcoholic drinks, such as ready-to-drink mixed alcoholic drinks that have until now escaped the obligation to provide information on their composition, would have to show an ingredient list and also information on their nutrient content.

As regards wine, spirits and beer, there are specificities in the production of those products and we need to ensure that competitive products are not treated in a discriminatory manner. The Commission would produce a report on the ingredient listing and nutrition labelling of these products and may subsequently adopt specific Community rules through Comitology.

Finally the labelling proposal includes a flexible mechanism that would allow innovation for some aspects of the labelling rules, in particular as regards presentation of nutrition information. In this way, the presentation of information can be adapted to different and changing markets and consumer demands.

### **Novel foods**

Finally, a few words on novel foods.

The Novel Food proposal aims to simplify the administrative burden for food business operators for obtaining pre-market approval for innovative food products.

It also seeks to speed up the authorisation process through a centralised food safety evaluation by EFSA and the setting up of precise deadlines at each step of the procedure.

I very much welcome the ongoing work of the European Parliament on this dossier, and I look forward a fruitful discussion on this dossier in due course.

Chairman, Honourable Members,

I have set out some of the key actions of interest to this Committee. I am very keen to hear your views on the measures I have outlined, and stand ready to answer any questions which may arise.

**End**

**1447 words**