



Honey labelling: Time to bee transparent



Tuesday 10 November 2021, 11:00 – 12:30 CET

Hosted by MEP Juozas Olekas

Co-Chair of the 'Sustainable Agriculture, Food Systems & Apiculture' Working Group of the European Parliament Intergroup on 'Climate Change, Biodiversity & Sustainable Development'

Speakers:

- **MEP Juozas Olekas**
- **Brigitte Misonne**, Head of G3 Unit on Animal Products, DG AGRI, European Commission
- **Simona Vrevc**, Counsellor for Agriculture and Special Committee for Agriculture Spokesperson, Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the European Union
- **Stanislav Jaš**, Vice-Chair of the Working Party on Honey, Copa-Cogeca
- **Gemma Trigueros**, Food Expert, OCU (Member of BEUC)
- **Prof. Norberto García**, President of the Scientific Commission on Beekeeping Economy, Apimondia
- **Arne T. Henriksen**, Chairman, Danish Beekeepers' Association (on behalf of the Nordic Baltic Bee Council)
- **MEP Franc Bogovič**

Welcome Remarks

MEP Juozas Olekas

“The beekeeping sector is facing challenges as beekeepers endured the worst harvest in decades, yet despite of low production levels, honey prices have not risen due to honey imports.”

MEP Mr. Juozas Olekas started the event by emphasizing the importance of honey labelling for European consumers and beekeepers. Additionally, he added that pollinators are an integral part of the European Green Deal and that for biodiversity, pollinators are vital since bees pollinate more than 80% of crops and wide plants in Europe. Unfortunately, he continued, the beekeeping sector is facing challenges as beekeepers endured the worst harvest in decades, yet despite low production levels, honey prices have not risen due to honey imports. Mr. Olekas then explained that according to current legislation, the origin of honey should be noted on the label. However, for honey blends, the exact countries of origin, and the proportion of EU honey to non-EU honey does not need to be specified. This form of labelling can deceive consumers, he argued.

Brigitte Misonne, Head of G3 Unit on Animal Products, DG AGRI, European Commission

“Legislation on honey labelling must always preserve the functioning of the single market.”

Ms. Brigitte Misonne started by explaining what the Commission is currently doing on honey labelling. As stated in the Action Plan of the Farm to Fork Strategy, honey origin labelling will be addressed under Action 18, which is aimed at reviewing marketing standards for uptake and supply of sustainable products. She then informed the panellists that the Commission already had a public consultation on honey origin labelling. The opinion of the European Parliament can be found in the [October resolution of the Farm to Fork Strategy](#), Ms. Misonne mentioned. In this resolution, the European Parliament calls on the Commission to propose legislative changes for honey labelling rules that will result in better consumer information. It

also calls for support for the EU beekeeping sector by reinforcing import inspections to prevent imports of adulterated honey while stressing that all country-of-origin labelling needs to be effectively enforced to combat food fraud. Similar to the European Parliament, the Council also calls for a revision of the Directive relating to honey to specify the countries of origin of the honey used in honey blends. The current Slovenian presidency also supports this, Ms. Misonne specified. She then elaborated on the legislation that is in place now. The country of origin must be labelled when fully obtained in one single Member State. However, in blends, the label can be stated as 'blend of EU honey', 'blend of non-EU honey', or 'blend of EU and non-EU honey'. Moreover, she mentioned that national legislation might differ. Some Member States require that all honey that is packed in a specific territory be labelled with the exact country of origin. This is allowed by the EU if it does not block the import of honey from other EU Member States. Concerning fraud, Member States are responsible for performing controls and for taking appropriate actions to prevent fraud, she underlined. Concludingly, Ms. Misonne argued that further legislation must always preserve the functioning of the single market and that country origin labelling should not be confused with the consumer's choice for local products. Additionally, it was stressed that by origin labelling, the issue of fraud in the honey sector is not resolved. Lastly, she stated that the Commission plans to have legislative proposals on honey labelling in the second or third quarter of next year.

Interventions

Simona Vrevc, Counsellor for Agriculture and Special Committee for Agriculture Spokesperson, Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the European Union

“There is almost a unanimous support to change the Directive on honey labelling in the Council. However, how to change it remains unclear.”

Ms. Simona Vrevc underscored the importance of pollinators and the honey industry for the Slovenian presidency. The question of honey labelling, by providing consumers information concerning honey blends, and if this will help the beekeeping sector, needs to be answered. Ms. Vrevc reminded all panellists that labelling is an important tool for communication to the consumer. Communication of quality, nutritional value and origin helps the consumer to make

a more informed choice. Member States can decide on stricter honey labelling rules, however, she argued, these rules need to be applied at EU level. She followed by emphasizing that the Council has confirmed the political determination of EU Member States to address the honey labelling issue. There is almost unanimous support to change the Directive on honey labelling, however, regarding how to change it, remains undecided. Ms. Vrevc stated that the EU has the tools to support the beekeeping industry, with cost-effective measures. Therefore, she stated, the Slovenian Council presidency is looking to the Commission for taking ambitious initiative.

Stanislav Jaš, Vice-Chair of the Working Party on Honey, Copa-Cogeca

“Concerning honey blends, the beekeeping sector would like all honey origins including its percentage, in decreasing order, to be mentioned on the front of the label.”

Mr. Stanislav Jaš informed the panel that Copa-Cogeca, which has a working party on honey representing beekeepers, wants to ensure that the honey production sector in the EU is environmentally sustainable. However, he stressed, the issue of economic sustainability needs to be highlighted too. According to Mr. Jaš, the honey market has deteriorated over the years. The functioning of the market, especially honey pricing and authenticity, needs to be addressed, he argued. Major honey-producing countries have seen great fluctuations in productivity due to extreme conditions related to climate change – which reduce honey crops. Costs of production go up due to these extreme events, but the price of honey stagnates, he explained. Currently, the price of honey does not pay for its production, Mr. Jaš urged. Honey producers need to be helped, which can be done by improving transparency and by informing the consumer. He continued by stating that many beekeepers organizations support the revision of the honey Directive. Concretely, concerning honey blends, the beekeeping sector would like all honey origins including its percentage, in decreasing order, to be mentioned on the front of the label. This is a feasible and cost-effective solution, Mr. Jaš underscored. Additionally, rules on traceability need to be included in EU legislation to offer guidance for the beekeeping sector. He concluded by reassuring the panellist that by labelling all countries of honey blends, the EU market is not undermined.

Gemma Trigueros, Food Expert, OCU (Member of BEUC)

“The survey we conducted in Spain found that not the origin of honey but measuring the authenticity of honey proved to be problematic.”

Gemma Trigueros introduced a survey conducted in Spain. In this survey, twenty honey products on the Spanish market were researched, of which twelve were of Spanish origin and eight were honey blends. The study coincided with new Spanish legislation which went into force in December 2020. This legislation obliges all producers that pack honey in Spain to name the origin of honey on the label. It is, however, not obliged to mention the specific percentages, nor to put the countries in descending order on the label. Ms. Trigueros explained that it was found that Chinese honey was disappearing from the Spanish honey market. Since the legislation went into force, honey producers changed the honey blends not to have Chinese honey in them. Ms. Trigueros stressed that this did not lead to any significant price changes. The study found that not the origin of honey, but the authenticity of honey proved to be problematic. The two methods to detect frauds used in the study were found insufficient. Thus, Ms. Trigueros, declared that fraud methodology is the main problem to measure honey authenticity. An EU-wide method to combat this is needed. Lastly, she stressed that the honey labelling Directive must be ambitious and all-encompassing to prevent fraud.

Please find at the following link a report in Spanish entitled “[El misterioso caso de la miel de China](#)” co-created by COAG and Ocu.

Prof. Norberto García, President of the Scientific Commission on Beekeeping Economy, Apimondia

“The definitions of the European Directive on honey, the different modes of adulteration and a lack of good traceability systems should work in parallel with new labelling systems.”

Prof. Norberto García brought attention to the EU definition of honey, put forward in the Council Directive 2001/110/EC. According to the EU definition, honey is only produced by

bees, and if labelled as such, should not be mixed with any other substances other than honey and no pollen, or any other ingredient of honey, should be removed from it. Additionally, if honey is labelled for its geographical origin, it should not be blended with other filtered honey. The definition of honey illustrates the possible methods of adulteration, he stressed. Prof. García explained that the standards and definitions of honey of the United States are aligned with those of the EU. The difference, however, is that the US has updated the methods to deal with adulteration. Prof. García informed the panellists that the United States Pharmacopeia (USP) has published the Identity Standard for Honey in the Food Chemicals Codex. Currently, the USP is also working on its Honey Fraud Mitigation Guidance. In parallel, Apimondia updated its Statement on Honey Fraud in 2020. Dynamic standards which are often revised are key to prevent honey adulteration. Prof. García then continued by explaining that many countries are importing cheap honey to Europe, and then they might export it as locally produced honey. Thus, he concluded, good traceability systems need to be in place. Lastly, he considered that an update of the European Directive regarding purity testing, and an improvement of the traceability systems should work in parallel with new labelling systems.

Arne T. Henriksen, Chairman, Danish Beekeepers' Association (on behalf of the Nordic Baltic Bee Council)

"The NBBC calls for a mandatory indication of the country of origin of all honey. All countries of origin should be listed on the front label, in descending order quantity, including a clear indication of the percentages used in the blend."

Representing the Nordic-Baltic Bee Council (NBBC), Mr. Arne Henriksen gave an example of mislabelling honey in the EU. He showed a jar of honey where the label falsely stated that the honey was produced in Denmark. The example stressed that analytical fraud detection methods currently offer no real solution to the problem of adulteration. Mr. Henriksen mentioned that most consumers prefer local honey, but the countries of origin, and the percentages in honey blends, are not communicated to the consumer. Reacting to this, the NBBC have a memorandum on origin labelling of honeybee products and their traceability in the food chain. The memorandum is produced for policymakers in the Nordic-Baltic region as well as EU policymakers. The NBBC calls for a mandatory indication of the country of origin of

all honey. For honey blends, the NBBC calls for that all countries of origin be listed on the front label, in descending order quantity, including a clear indication of the percentages used in the blend. The NBBC moreover calls for enhanced traceability of honeybee products. Traceability provisions need to be reliable, beekeeper-friendly and verifiable, Mr. Henriksen urged.

Q&A Session with the audience

A question was asked to Ms. Misonne concerning honey origin labelling, to clarify under what regulation it falls. Ms. Misonne admitted that honey labelling was expected to be dealt within the Action of Origin Labelling. However, due to a difference in legal basis, the Commission is conducting it under the Marketing Standards Review. Ms. Misonne reminded the audience that the content will be the same.

Answering a question on the link between traceability and the honey supply chain, Ms. Misonne explained that traceability of honey is difficult. Currently, there is no method to make sure that what is on the label corresponds with what is in the jar. Honey is dependent on the immediate environment of the bees; thus, technologies can only roughly indicate where honey is from. Concerning the percentages of honey in honey blends, it is currently impossible to indicate where a specific part of the honey blend is from, she reiterated. Origin traceability, therefore, relies on the good faith of the producers. No methods that have been developed would meet all expectations while allowing genuine operators to label correctly. Mr. Jaš complemented Ms. Misonne's intervention by mentioning that indeed the traceability issue is uncharted in the honey sector. However, there are already operators that use traceability systems, for example through blockchain technology, and new traceability methods are being developed. Mr. Jaš highlighted that reference honey is needed, which beekeepers are willing to provide. With reference honey, we can put in place a working tracing system and improve the honey statistics, he stressed. Prof. García added that methods of adulteration detection improve daily. Thus, he argued, a holistic approach is needed comprising of both testing and non-testing approaches. With a proper combination of adulteration detection methods, we will get adequate results.

A member of the audience asked the panel what they think can be further done to prevent the vulnerability of the honey sector from fraudulent low-quality imports and what type of penalty could be considered in case of fraud. Prof. García responded that the first step

is to update the standards regarding honey purity and authenticity testing. Concerning the complexity of testing, Prof. García flagged that the USP is working on the development in a Decision Guidance for honey purity and authenticity testing, which will be published next year. Ms. Trigueros added that the use of a decision tree can help in creating more clarity when reviewing honey. The practical use of decision trees can complement the holistic approach for honey adulteration detection.

Lastly, Ms. Vrevc answered a question regarding what changes the Slovenian presidency would foresee for providing simple and efficient information for consumers. She emphasized that the Council has broadly supported the idea that the Directive has to be addressed, but views differ on how to address it. Additionally, she ensured that, also after the presidency, Slovenia will continue building coalitions to achieve ambitious solutions by next year.

Reactions from MEP

MEP Franc Bogovič

“Honey origin needs to be communicated, putting only ‘EU honey’ or ‘non-EU and EU honey’ on the label, is a disservice to the consumer”.

MEP Mr. Franc Bogovič declared that climate change should be taken into account in this debate. Concerning labelling, the MEP argued that honey origin needs to be communicated to the consumer. Putting only EU or non-EU honey on the label is a disservice.

Closing remarks

MEP Juozas Olekas

“We must not forget that consumers are central to this debate on honey labelling”.

To conclude, MEP Mr. Juozas Olekas emphasized that the consumers are at the centre of this discussion. Labelling traceability and improving testing technologies are important when

updating the Directive. Mr. Olekas ended by saying he is hopeful for a good ambitious proposal by the European Commission.