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GAIN Report

Global Agricultural Information Network

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Europeans Trust Scientists over Authorities says Food Safety Study

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Agricultural Situation

Agriculture in the News

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Report Highlights:

The European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) and Eurobarometer conducted a study on consumer perceptions of food safety throughout the European Union (EU). Notable conclusions suggest that respondents trust scientists over EU institutions. And, even though respondents are less concerned about genetically modified organisms (GMOs) compared to the previous study from 2010, they continue to demonstrate a heightened awareness of food issues involving pesticides, antibiotic residues/resistance, and pollutants in meat and poultry.

General Information:

EFSA and Eurobarometer conducted a study on consumer perceptions of food safety throughout the EU published in June 2019. Coordinated by the European Commission Directorate-General for Communication, the study provides follow-up to a 2010 consumer perceptions and food safety study.

The 2019 study included over 27,000 EU citizens representing all 28 member states. Results from the study are available online for both EU averages and individual member states at:

<https://www.efsa.europa.eu/en/corporate/pub/eurobarometer19>.

The Eurobarometer survey included a breadth of questions surrounding food safety including consumer trust, awareness, interest, concern, and priorities. It should be noted that questions regarding perceptions of food safety were not focused on individual products, but a variety of food safety themes in Europe, including genetically modified ingredients in food or drinks, additives, pesticide residues, antibiotic/hormone residues in meat, plant disease, food hygiene, and others [1].

Respondents were asked if they had heard about a list of 15 food safety topics (including those previously mentioned) to determine consumer awareness. **Very High** awareness were respondents familiar with at least eight of the 15 listed topics. Respondents in the very high category reached 55%.

Only 7% had **Very Low** familiarity (< 1 topic). Respondents were most aware of food issues involving additives (72%), food hygiene (68%), and 66% for the following broad category: antibiotics, hormones, or steroid residues in meat. Respondents were least familiar with genome editing (21%), nanoparticles in food (30%), and poisonous molds in food and feed crops (39%).

Respondents were also queried to highlight their top issues/concerns from the same list of topics. The top concern (44%) was the broad category of antibiotics, hormones, or steroid residues in meat, followed by pesticide residues in foods (39%), and environmental pollutants from meat and dairy (37%). Trends in awareness appear to parallel emotive public discussions on trade with the United States, particularly for pesticides, hormone treated beef, and pollutants in meat and poultry (e.g. “chlorinated chicken”).

Notably, since the last EFSA/Eurobarometer study in 2010, the top issues of respondent awareness have not changed for antibiotics in meat, pesticide residues, and pollutants in meat and poultry. In 2010, however, genetically modified ingredients was the fourth most commonly listed topic of awareness, whereas the 2019 survey indicated a decline, down to 27% of respondents [2] .

Despite the apparent alignment of respondent concerns and awareness with government policies, only 58% of respondents indicated having trust in EU institutions for information about food safety. Overall scientists and consumer organizations were the most trusted sources on food risks with response rates of 82% and 79%, respectively.

The study also queried considerations for purchasing food. On average, “where food comes from” was the most highlighted and likely tracks the EU’s vehement policy of Geographical Indications. Of the 28 member states, only six listed food safety as the most important factor when purchasing food [3] , specifically member states in Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean (excluding Italy). Twelve of the 28 member states listed cost as their top factor [4]. Of the individual member state responses, the regional differences are notable. Interestingly, the cost of food was a top factor for France, Germany, Sweden, Belgium, the UK, Portugal, and Italy, along with, perhaps less surprisingly, food origin. The top factor

for the Netherlands was nutrient content. Only respondents from one member state, Poland, listed taste as the top factor when purchasing food.

^[1] The entire list of all 15 food safety topics can be found on pp. 30 of Special Eurobarometer Wave EB91.3 *Food safety in the EU* April 2019.

^[2] It should be noted that the survey question in 2010 regarding concerns about food safety topics was worded differently than the most recent survey. Thus, any direct comparison should be taken with caution.

^[3] Cyprus, Malta, Hungary, Greece, Slovakia, and Romania listed food safety as their top factor when buying food.

^[4] Portugal, Lithuania, United Kingdom, Latvia, Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Belgium, Spain, Ireland, Hungary, and Denmark listed cost as their top factor when buying food.