

MEPS demand EU vegan and vegetarian labelling rules

By Sara Lewis

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A cross-party group of MEPs have written to EU Health and Food Safety Commissioner Vytenis Andriukaitis, demanding Europe-wide rules on vegan and vegetarian labelling and complaining about the lack of European regulation on such labels.

“May it be for ecological reasons, for concerns about animal welfare or simply as a personal choice, the number of people inclined towards a vegan or vegetarian diet is rising. These consumers need consistent consumer information, and the current lack of specific provisions in this area is misleading and thus harmful for European consumers,” six MEPs wrote on behalf of their political groups, not only to Andriukaitis but also the EU Commissioners for Environment, Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, Justice, Consumers and Gender Equality and Agriculture and Rural Development, Karmenu Vella, Věra Jourová and Phil Hogan respectively.

The 22 February letter seen by *EU Food Law* points out that the [2011 food information to consumers regulation \(FIC - 1169/2011\)](#) “stipulates” that the Commission ‘shall adopt implementing acts on the application of the requirements to the following voluntary food information ... information related to suitability of a food for vegetarians or vegans’. But the FIC did not set a deadline for action either on vegan or vegetarian labelling or ‘may contain’ allergen labels, when foods could be accidentally contaminated or contain trace amounts of an allergen.

“As long ago as 2011, the Commission recognized the need for clear information on food for vegans and vegetarians, which we highly welcome. Nevertheless, no implementing act relating to vegetarian and vegan food has so far been adopted by the European Commission,” write the six MEPs, who are Luxembourg’s Claude Turmes for the Greens/European Free Alliance, Germany’s Cornelia Ernst for the European United Left/Nordic Green Left, Italy’s Eleonora Evi for Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy, Romanian Daciana Octavia Sârbu for the Socialist and Democrats, Marietje Schaake of the Netherlands for the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe and Finland’s Sirpa Pietikäinen for the European People’s Party.

The letter continues: “Given the increasing number of vegan and vegetarian consumers in the EU, it is imperative to provide accurate and specific legislation, without which consumers can be misled by product labelling.”

It points out that the EU does not currently have a common legal definition of the terms ‘vegetarian’ or ‘vegan’, “which is the source of further confusion.”

The letter also complains: “The voluntary claim ‘suitable for vegans or vegetarians’ is used on several food products in the different Member States, although there are no pre-set European criteria which have to be followed to obtain the right to use this label.”

This means that “Unfortunately, there are still today examples of food companies wrongly labelling food as 'suitable for vegans' although the food has been tested on animals or contains ingredients coming from animals such as honey, shellac or beeswax. There is neither rightful labelling nor any mandatory declaration of the employment of animal derivatives to produce substances such as fining agents (used to create clear beers, wines, ciders, fruit juices and other beverages) under EU regulations.”

The MEPs underline: “Clear and accurate information about the ingredients on-package at the point of sale is urgently required.”

They argue: “Respecting consumer choice is not a right, it is a duty. In the case of vegan or vegetarian food, the consumer does not necessarily have to be vegan or vegetarian: the choice can be based on conviction, it can be influenced by health reasons or can be a result of a personal choice. A lack of clear and comprehensive labelling undermines this choice. This puts not only consumers who choose vegan or vegetarian food by choice or by conviction, but also those who choose it due to health reasons in a situation in which food sold in the European Union cannot be trusted as the information given about ingredients is void or inaccurate.”

The letter ends by stressing that “we consider the matter urgent. We therefore ask the Commission to comply with its promises and obligations. We are calling for a quick proposal of implementing acts on the application of requirements for food information for vegetarians and vegans as this would guarantee appropriate labelling not only for vegans and vegetarians but more broadly for any consumer wanting to make an informed choice in this area.”

The MEPs are not the only ones pushing for the Commission to produce the implementing act. At the **EU Food Law** conference last November [Amire Mahmood](#), head of the Food Law and Food Labelling division at the Austrian Federal Ministry of Health and Woman said harmonisation was urgently needed, as “We don’t really want 27 different interpretations of what is vegetarian, what is vegan.”

Germany has also lost patience with waiting for the implementing act and last year adopted [national definitions](#) of ‘vegan’ and ‘vegetarian’ for use in voluntary labelling.