

Andriukaitis defends better regulation brake on legislation

By Sara Lewis

Mar 24 2017

EU Health and Food Safety Commissioner Vytenis Andriukaitis has dismissed claims that the Commission's Better Regulation agenda, where existing and planned laws are assessed to see whether they impose too much red tape on business and are really needed on health or other grounds, is really a "no regulation agenda".

EU Food Law put the question to the Commissioner at the Safe Food Advocacy Europe (SAFE) conference in Brussels this week, asking whether, given all the delays that the impact assessments and studies brought, it was a "no regulation agenda". The Commissioner responded: "Better Regulation means better regulation. It means we need to have evidence."

He said that if he followed the advice of those who want to regulate everything "it will be a disaster in Europe."

Andriukaitis said he would not follow the approach through social media which was "ban, ban," adding: "The big bang creates the universe," but "if it will be the big ban, this will be disastrous."

Earlier in his speech to the conference the Commissioner had pointed to the precautionary principle, enshrined in European law by its general food law regulation (178/2002) and said: "Let me take this occasion to actually remind you what the precautionary principle precisely consists of. I have indeed realised that it is often referred to but not in very accurate manner." He went on to say that "acting in accordance with the precautionary principle means taking action when you know there is a risk but you cannot assess precisely the level of risk."

Andriukaitis said that "this is very much different from the precautionary approach invoked by many stakeholders to request a ban without evidence."

He pointed to the challenge of feeding a growing world population faced with climate change and a need to curb food waste, mixed with consumer scepticism about new technologies or pesticides, saying: "More demanding attitudes towards new methods and approaches to food production clash with the need for food systems to evolve and make progress. Not least to produce enough food to feed a growing world population from a finite or even shrinking area of agricultural land."

Noting "the need to become more sustainable; to contribute to climate change efforts; to a circular economy; and also to reduce food waste," Andriukaitis argued: "These objectives cannot be met without taking a positive, forward-looking approach to food production.

We need to address the widely-held suspicion and mistrust towards science and evidence-based decisions on new food products; on substances; and, on new methods of food production."

Andriukaitis went on to ask: "The main question is - how can we inspire confidence in carefully and meticulously considered scientific assessments, when many people are more likely to pay attention to an emotional campaign conducted via social media?"

He went on to cite the example of pesticides. “Plant protection products that are safe, efficient and used in a sustainable manner contribute to the production of safe and healthy food. Our EU approval system for pesticides is probably the strictest in the world. Our legislation requires applicants for the approval of a pesticide to prove – with an extensive amount of data – that their products are safe for humans and animals, and for the environment.”

The Commissioner continued: “The stringent action taken on several neonicotinoids due to their adverse effects on bees is an excellent example of where our regulatory system reacted quickly to new scientific evidence.” He compared this to glyphosate where the conclusions had not been that it should be banned.

He asked: “How can we have trust in scientific assessment when people are more likely to listen to a scare story on social media?”

Andriukaitis said: “In most of these science-related issues, people tend to look for ‘black or white’ answers where almost always a degree of ‘grey’ – of uncertainty – is inevitable.”

For Andriukaitis “we should the message across that there is a certain degree of risk and uncertainty in every decision they take.”