Vitamin & Mineral News That May Be Hard To Swallow

Earlier this month, the Irish Association of Health Stores (IAHS) defended its petition in the European Parliament against the European Commission's planned setting of European Union (EU)-wide maximum limits for dosages of vitamins and minerals in food supplements. The petition, submitted originally in December 2007 with the support of 60,000 Irish citizens, claims that measures to harmonize maximum levels of vitamin and mineral food supplements under the Food Supplements Directive (2002/46/EC)-soon to be implemented by the European Commission-would unduly impact consumers, health stores and practitioners in Ireland. Instead of being closed down, the apparent goal of the European Commission, the European Parliament's Petitions Committee chairman insisted that the petition be kept open. Further, the chairman requested that the issues be referred to the European Parliament's Committee on Environment, Public Health and Food Safety (ENVI) for further consideration. Additionally, the European Commission has been asked to provide a written response to the Petitions Committee on the challenges raised in recent discussions. All four Irish members of the European Parliament's (MEP) Committee who attended and participated in the discussions expressed concerns over the commission's proposals and their potential impacts on businesses and consumers, as did the only UK MEP partaking in the discussion, Roger Helmer. There were no dissenting voices among any of the MEPs. According to Irish MEP Kathy Sinnott, vice-chair of the Petitions Committee and host of the petition, "This directive is unreasonable and controlling. It has become a great worry to people all over Ireland who shop in local health food stores, and who use vitamins and minerals to improve and maintain their health." Referring to the proposed regime, Sinnott adds, "In the case of my own son, while the new regulation might aim to 'protect' him from higher dose supplements, these are the very supplements that have protected him from malnutrition and that have saved his life. Yet they are now at risk of being banned." "There are numerous scientific flaws in the risk management methods being considered by the European Commission and the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA), and small businesses and health-conscious consumers will be the real losers if the approach is not altered to reflect the known science," says Dr. Robert Verkerk, scientific advisor to the IAHS, who presented on behalf of the petitioners. Verkerk urged that real scientific debate should begin following the imminent release of the commission's draft proposals for maximum levels. He also warned that the imposition of blanket EU-wide maximum levels for vitamin and mineral supplements would encourage, through the Internet, a black market of completely unregulated products that would potentially expose consumers to significant risks. "The inevitable development of a black market would fly in the face of the commission's stated objective of bringing in this measure to protect consumers," Ververk confirms. The European Commission's case was presented by Basil Mathioudakis, head of the Food Law, Nutrition and Labelling unit. Mathioudakis indicated that he expected the commission would be ready to publish draft maximum levels at the end of February or in March. In his response to the Irish

petition, he stated that the main purpose of the proposed law was to ensure that consumers were adequately protected. He also mentioned that there were political, as well as scientific, pressures towards the lowering of dosages of supplements in countries like Ireland, the UK, Holland and Sweden, which presently allow higher doses than most of the rest of the EU. "Good science is the primary requirement here," says Irish MEP Marian Harkin. "The models used by the commission need proper validation. How can you set limits for nutrients that don't take into account the variations in food quality between different geographic regions in Europe or between seasons, where it may be hard to get fresh, nutritious produce during the winter months?" "There is a very strong case for some degree of national competence being retained," adds Harkin, "and for bringing in partial rather than total harmonization of these levels. This could create a win-win situation for all parties, while ensuring risks from both over- and under-consumption of vitamins and minerals are minimized." According to Jill Bell, IAHS chair, who was also present at the meeting of the Petitions Committee, "The IAHS is delighted with the support MEPs gave our petition and with Chairman Libicki's evident willingness to give us a good hearing. We look forward to the opening of more detailed discussions and are optimistic that the importance of up-to-date science may now impact on EFSA's deliberations. Any delay in the setting of maximum permissible levels is to be greatly welcomed if based on the application of sound science and proportionate law, and all parties should be pleased if such a meeting of minds can be achieved." For more information, see www.fsai.ie/consultative_council/Consultative_Council_Open_Meeting_Invite_2009.pdf [1].

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