

5 urgent actions to help ease food supply pressure

(Brussels, 23 March 2020) In the face of the devastating coronavirus pandemic, the food and drink industry is doing everything it can to ensure all citizens can continue accessing safe, affordable and quality food and drink products.

FoodDrinkEurope Director General Mella Frewen said: “Our industry is made up of 4.7 million dedicated workers and 294,000 business of all sizes, and from all corners of Europe. It is our collective goal to make sure that shelves are stacked, and fridges are full. However, this is becoming increasingly difficult. We have therefore identified five pressure points putting a particular strain on the food supply chain.

“If we act on these five areas now, we believe we can avoid serious disruptions to food and drink supplies to consumers and safeguard our jobs and businesses.”

FoodDrinkEurope has written to Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and is calling on the Commission, in close co-ordination with EU Member States, to take urgent action on these five points:

1: Support the food sector workforce

The food and drink manufacturing industry relies on a dedicated workforce, including factory workers, fork-lift and lorry drivers, and many more, to produce food and to transport it to destination markets. However, with many of the workforce off sick, following guidance to stay at home, facing travel restrictions and quarantine at borders, or looking after children, we face a serious risk of labour shortages.

Given their essential role to maintain food security in Europe, we urge the Commission to provide EU guidelines to Members States to establish harmonised protocols for food sector workers to continue their work safely, where they are fit and able, just as workers in the medical sector have also been given special dispensations and privileges.

2: Recognise the entire food supply chain as ‘essential’

We welcomed the Commission’s March 16 statement announcing guidelines to Member States on border management measures, and recognising food as an ‘essential service’. However, we are aware that different Member States have different interpretations of what may constitute an ‘essential’ sector and the measures to keep the food value chain in full operation. Food and drink products, ingredients, packaging and packaging materials (which among other things are essential for food safety and transportation), feed and pet food, need to be regarded as essential by all EU Member States, to avoid delays at borders.

We urge the Commission to impress on all Member States the essential importance of the food sector and the special measures needed to keep the food supply chain functioning in all of its aspects.

3: Unblock transport bottlenecks

The food supply chain relies on the ability to move ingredients and finished products rapidly across borders in order to meet consumer demand. However, our members are reporting long delays at borders as lorries are either delayed or prevented from crossing borders entirely. In addition, companies are starting to receive requests to provide delivery lorries with an official company document stating that the lorry contents are classified as an 'essential sector' of vital importance or asking for 'certificates'. No such standardised paperwork exists across the EU, leading to yet more delays. There are further concerns that goods blocked at borders will go to waste without emergency measures to re-distribute or donate them.

We request that the Commission follow-up on the measures set out in the Informal Transport Council of March 18, including strongly encouraging Member States to implement the priority 'green lanes' for food sector lorries, and waiving existing weekend bans. We strongly advise the harmonisation of border crossing protocols across the EU in order to maintain a fully functioning Single Market and to avoid transport bottlenecks. Further consideration should be given to measures to re-distribute food which cannot reach its intended market.

4: Support struggling businesses

Ninety-nine percent of the EU's food and drink businesses are small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The coronavirus pandemic is threatening the continued existence of many of these businesses. One major impact on food and drink manufacturers has been the closure of large segments of the food service sector – including restaurants, hotels, bars and cafeterias. Food business operators have reported a significant fall in demand along with general delays in their supply chains.

We urge the Commission, in collaboration with Member States, to develop comprehensive emergency measures for the food sector, to minimise the financial impact on food businesses, maintain jobs and to help re-build the economic sustainability of the sector over the long term. We also count on the Commission to facilitate a flexible and pragmatic regulatory environment which supports vulnerable businesses in these times of crisis. For instance, flexibility around the implementation of state aid rules and certain fiscal support could be crucial to cope with impact in the Member States.

5: Facilitate global trade

As a major importer and exporter of agri-food products, the EU food and drink industry plays a major part in bringing food and drink to consumers worldwide. Since the coronavirus outbreak, our members have reported declining sales, particularly in China and the wider Asia region. Uncertainty is a major problem for exporters. Some of them have not been able to ship merchandise for two months, while others are experiencing noticeable delays from their usual clients. The European food and drink industry is also reliant on ingredients imported from third countries to manufacture products – these supply chains are also severely disrupted.

We ask the Commission to hold bilateral talks with our major trade partners to facilitate trade in food and drink products and essential ingredients and call for international collaboration to ensure that products can continue to move globally.

For more information on the food and drink industry's activities during the Covid-19 pandemic, please refer to:

- FoodDrinkEurope's Q&A on the most topical issues relating to Covid-19 for the food and drink industry, available [here](#);
- FoodDrinkEurope's Joint Statement with COPA-COGECA and CELCAA on Covid-19 and the food supply chain, available [here](#).

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Note to the editors:

FoodDrinkEurope is the organisation of Europe's food and drink industry, the largest manufacturing sector and a leading employer in the EU and a key contributor to its economy (294,000 companies, 99% SMEs, 4.7 million employees).