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Brussels, 24 February 2015

[Open Letter]

Save the EU School Fruit Scheme: 'Better Regulation' cannot go against the wellbeing of European children

Dear President Jean-Claude Juncker,
Dear First Vice-President Frans Timmermans,
Dear Commissioners Vytenis Andriukaitis, Phil Hogan and Tibor Navracsics

We are deeply concerned that the Commission is recommending to the co-legislators to put on hold any further proceedings with respect to the EU School Fruit Scheme (SFS) while *"the whole scheme will be evaluated for subsidiarity, proportionality and better regulation reasons as part of the CAP simplification."*

On behalf of a wide coalition of public health community, food and farming organisations, and representatives of the fruit and vegetable sector, we ask you to keep the SFS in place.

The SFS is a unique and essential instrument with substantial EU-added value. It benefits over 20 million children every year and addresses important challenges to today's society in a simple and well-conceived scheme:

- There are **22 million overweight children in the EU of which 5.1 million obese** - an EU-wide trend set to make another 1.2 million children overweight and 300,000 obese each year. The daily consumption of health-promoting agricultural products such as fresh fruit and vegetables contributes to prevent and tackle overweight and obesity in the EU. Yet, currently we observe a **decline in consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables by children, young people and people of lower socio-economic background**. Habits acquired at a young age likely to remain life-long so the SFS is a worthwhile investment.
- **Unhealthy and unsustainable eating habits are partially to blame for the significant rise in major chronic diet-related diseases** such as cardiovascular diseases, type-2 diabetes and certain forms of cancer. The public health arguments that justified the implementation of the scheme in the first place, remain valid as the SFS holds great potential to help address the chronic disease burden.
- **The level of consumption of fruit and vegetables has fallen to alarming lows across Europe**. Two-thirds of the Member States do not even manage to reach the absolute minimum of 400g (capita/day) of fruit and vegetable consumption recommended by the World Health Organisation (WHO). This continues

to decrease, especially under the ongoing economic crisis, contributing to increasing levels of (food) poverty and social exclusion in Europe¹.

- **Dismantling the SFS would have dramatic implications:**
 - for European consumers and in particular the youngest who are not benefitting sufficiently from fresh fruit and vegetables in their diet. There is huge potential to build on these existing schemes to make them flagship EU tools for promoting sustainable production and consumption in schools across Europe.
 - for the agricultural sector, including small, medium-scale enterprises and shorter and organic food supply chains, since despite being a key agricultural sector for the “*jobs and growth*” objectives of the European Commission, the sector has lost around 18 million tonnes in production, because of the lack of consumption. Educating the youngest is the key starting point to reverse this trend.
 - for social protection and healthcare budgets, given that the costs of unhealthy diets are rising to unsustainable levels beyond absorption by healthcare and social systems, and are estimated to be more than €200 billion/year. With increased consumption of fruits and vegetables, this cost may be reduced and the savings invested elsewhere in the public domain.

Against this background, we question the decision to challenge a popular and successful scheme. The scheme is widely supported not only by the producers to remedy declines in consumption, but also by the influential international community of scientists, researchers, doctors and other health experts for the public health benefits. We therefore ask the European Commission to show continued strong support for the SFS.

Further arguments for keeping the SFS in place include:

- The Commission proposes a new evaluation of the scheme on the ground of “*subsidiary, proportionality and better regulation*”. The SFS has already been subjected to evaluations, scientific reviews, as well as an effectiveness report by the European Court of Auditors, all of which consistently indicate its coherence, the highly positive consumption and health outcomes for the beneficiaries (schools, teachers, children and parents). The SFS gained support from other EU institutions such as the European Parliament, as well as the EU Member States.
- In the most recent CAP reform, which was finalised in 2013, the scheme was not only reconfirmed, but even further reinforced, with an extension of its budget and scope. A move by the Commission against the reinforced SFS is incoherent. We question therefore the principle of political discontinuity behind the Commission’s plan.
- Whilst it is still to be seen what to expect from the Commission’s initiative to simplify the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), removing one of its more positive elements would be at odds with the European commitments enshrined in the Art 168 of TFEU calling for “*health in all policies*”. It would be a step backwards and it fails to recognise the EU’s own “*Strategy for Europe on Nutrition, Overweight and Obesity-related Health Issues*” developed in 2007 and other European recommendations included in the WHO “*Vienna Declaration on Nutrition and Non-communicable Diseases*” adopted by European Health Ministers in 2013.
- **Removing the SFS would jeopardise the efforts and achievements of the first 5 years of the scheme.** Changing eating habits is a long-term process which can only be secured by repeated consumption of a variation of fruit and vegetables. It is precisely this long-term objective that the scheme is addressing. Should the SFS be dismantled, and given the ongoing economic crisis and budget restriction at national or regional levels, we are convinced that with only a few exceptions, such a scheme will be discontinued by lack of vital resources, if not political willingness. The role of Europe is therefore crucial to maintain it.
- **The cost of the scheme is minimal within the CAP**, corresponding to 0.25% of the EU agricultural budget (from €90-150 million). The SFS is probably one of the most relevant, all-encompassing and cost-effective tools of the CAP. It provides direct support towards the further development of sustainable agri-food chains. It is also a unique tool to provide EU visibility every week in more than 50,000 schools across the continent and demonstrate that the EU cares for its youngest citizens.

¹ “*Fruit and vegetable consumption falls despite government efforts to promote health.*” Rabobank 2013 report. Available from https://www.rabobank.com/en/press/search/2013/20130704_Rabobank_Fruit_Vegetable_consumption_falls_despite_government_efforts_to_promote_health.html

We call upon the Commission to review its position and work constructively towards the maintenance of the SFS.

We remain available with our experts to discuss these matters further with you and believe that we can altogether contribute to a better, more just and healthier Europe, the necessary cornerstone for Europe's ambition for more jobs and growth.

Sincerely Yours,

Dr. Saida Barnat, Deputy Director - Scientific director, Aprifel (Agency for Research and Information on Fruit and Vegetables)

Jacques Dasque, Secretary General at AREFLH (Assemblée des Régions Européennes Fruitières, Légumières et Horticoles)

John Gordon Williams, President of the Association of Italian Chiropractors

Dr Katrín Fjeldsted, President of Standing Committee of European Doctors (CPME)

Susanne Logstrup, Director of European Heart Network (EHN)

Nina Renshaw, Secretary General of European Public Health Alliance (EPHA)

Clive Needle, Director Policy and Advocacy at EuroHealthNet

Todor Ivanov, Secretary General of European Community of Consumer Cooperatives (Eurocoop)

Philippe Binard, General Delegate at Freshfel Europe, the European Fresh Fruit & Vegetables Association

Sophie Peresson, Regional Director of International Diabetes Federation Europe (IDF Europe)

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