



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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EUROPEAN SCHOOL FRUIT SCHEME NEEDS SOUND IMPLEMENTATION AND PROPER COMMUNICATION

Although the European School Fruit Scheme (SFS) kicked off at the beginning of the 2009/2010 school year, substantial concerns remain regarding the sound implementation of the scheme and the appropriate communication policy around it. These were the key elements of the message passed yesterday by Freshfel Europe to the delegates of the “Management Committee for the Common Organisation of Agricultural Markets on Fruit & Vegetables”. While underlining and welcoming the progress made in the last months with the launch of the SFS in 24 Member States, Freshfel highlighted that the sector remains impatient for a full and effective implementation of the scheme across Europe.

Freshfel Europe, the European Association for the fresh fruit and vegetable sector, was invited by the European Commission to present the views of the sector on the EU School Fruit Scheme (SFS) to the Management Committee for Fruit and Vegetables on the occasion of their meeting on Tuesday 17 November. Philippe Binard, General Delegate of Freshfel, gave a presentation providing an overview of feedback, concerns and input from the Association's membership regarding the current implementation stage. While highlighting the background and objectives of the programme, Freshfel once again stressed that health aspects should be and remain the core of this scheme as they are particularly relevant regarding the eligible products for the programme. Focus should be given to a diversified range of fresh produce. Ramon Rey, President of Freshfel, stated: *“The School Fruit Scheme should become an essential tool to address the dramatic rise of childhood obesity. Preventing obesity is the best long term solution, but the integrity of the programme and a careful selection of products is of paramount importance to make sure that the youngest consumers change their eating habits, get used to new tastes and textures, while discovering and enjoying a wide diversity of fresh produce.”* As obesity is reaching epidemic level, the lack of action represents a huge burden on social security budgets across Europe. Costs relating to obesity - due amongst other things to the lack of fresh produce consumption - are estimated to be more than 130 billion €/year.

While the Council and Commission SFS regulations are now in place, the work is not over, but on the contrary has just started. However, Freshfel has concerns regarding some aspects of the implementation of the programme through national strategies. Philippe Binard stated: *“There is a lack not only of clarity and detailed information for some national strategies, but also centralised and consolidated information of programmes at the EU-level is missing.”* Freshfel underlined that the sector is eager to contribute and to provide its expertise on logistics, product handling and sorting for the successful implementation of the scheme. Regretfully, until today there is only a limited involvement of the sector by Member States authorities. *“The School Fruit Scheme is a unique opportunity for a public-private partnership where all expertise available should be used. Schools, the fruit and vegetables sector, the scientific and health community, programme managers, as well as the national and European public sector all have input and experience to provide for the success of the programme”* he added.

During the meeting, Freshfel also emphasised concerns regarding the proper communication of the School Fruit Scheme and called for the full use of the agreed budget of €1,3 million for EU accompanying measures as a key tool to secure the good functioning and awareness of the programme. For reasons unclear, the Commission seems not to be using this budget. As a consequence many communication and networking issues remain pending. There is indeed little progress with regard to the launch of an EU website to promote the scheme. A

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dedicated F&V website could provide information about health benefits and scientific studies on fruit and vegetables, toolkits for teachers and kids, recipes, best practices on SFS across Europe and beyond, links to national programmes, etc. Moreover, under this budget, the Commission should also be fostering networking and the exchange of best practices. Freshfel urged the Commission to set up an expert scientific group as well as a stakeholders advisory ad hoc committee. Finally, Freshfel called on the Commission to boost its communication on the SFS to raise awareness about the programme. The communication policy should also be fine-tuned to avoid confusing young consumers about the elements of a balanced diet. At the moment the Commission is implying by the fact that school schemes are available for milk and fruit and vegetables that a balanced diet can be reached by consuming these two product categories alone. *“The Tasty Bunch campaign is misleading and confusing. A balanced diet cannot be reached by eating only selective products of the food pyramid. Freshfel advocates the Commission to refocus its strategy and move towards a dedicated communication policy. This is particularly relevant for the School Fruit Scheme to reach a greater level of awareness by schools, teachers, students and the general public”* Philippe Binard commented.

Ramon Rey concludes: *“The Commission and the Member States should not rest on their laurels as much remains to be done and in this respect Freshfel’s criticisms should be taken as a constructive step and eagerness of the sector towards a successful implementation of a much demanded and needed programme!”*

ENDS

Note to the Editors: Freshfel Europe is the European Fresh Produce Association, representing the interests of importers, exporters, wholesalers and distributors, and retailers of fresh fruits and vegetables in Europe and beyond. Freshfel Europe currently has over 200 members, including both companies and associations. For more information, contact the association at info@freshfel.org or visit the association website www.freshfel.org.

Note about the European School Fruit Scheme: Last June, 24 of the 27 EU Member States announced their willingness to join the European School Fruit Scheme. The positive endorsement of the programme by a significant number of Member States was welcomed by Freshfel and the fresh fruit and vegetable sector as a positive step moving towards full use of the financial resources available for this project. The initiative was agreed upon earlier this year by Council Regulation 13/2009 and Commission Regulation 288/2009. Programmes worth €156 million, including an EU budget of €90 million, are planned to be implemented as of September 2009 to provide fresh fruit and vegetables to young Europeans at school during the 2009/2010 school year. The programme is in place for at least the next three years.