

Brussels, 19 November 2008

Commission welcomes political agreement on School Fruit Scheme worth €90 million per year

The European Commission welcomed today's political agreement in the Agriculture Council on its proposal for a European Union-wide scheme to provide fruit and vegetables to school children. European funds worth €90 million every year will pay for the purchase and distribution of fresh fruit and vegetables to schools. This money will be matched by national and private funds in those Member States which chose to make use of the programme. The School Fruit Scheme aims to encourage good eating habits in young people, which studies show tend to be carried on into later life. Besides providing fruit and vegetables to a target group of schoolchildren, the scheme will require participating Member States to set up strategies including educational and awareness-raising initiatives and the sharing of best practice. An estimated 22 million children in the EU are overweight. More than 5 million these are obese and this figure is expected to rise by 400,000 every year. Improved nutrition can play an important part in combating this problem. The scheme will begin at the start of the 2009/2010 school year.

"I'm delighted that the Council has given its support to our plan so quickly," said Mariann Fischer Boel, Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development. "Giving kids good habits at an early age is crucial as they will carry these into later life. Too many of our children eat far too little fruit and vegetables and often don't realise how delicious they are. You only have to walk down any high street in Europe to see the extent of the problems we face with overweight kids. Now we can do something about it."

Experts agree that a healthy diet can play an integral role in reducing obesity rates, and cutting the risk of serious health problems – such as cardiovascular disease and diabetes²– in later life. Key to this is the consumption of sufficient amounts of fruit and vegetables. The World Health Organisation recommends a minimum daily net intake of 400 grams of fruit and vegetables per person. The majority of Europeans fail to meet this target and the downward trend is particularly evident among the young.

Studies show that healthy eating habits are formed in childhood. People who eat a lot of fruit and vegetables in childhood remain good consumers. Those who eat little tend not to change their ways and also pass on their habits to their own children. Research has also shown that families with a lower level of income tend to consume less fruit and vegetables. As such, the free provision in schools of these healthy products can make a real difference, particularly in underprivileged areas.

Commission analysis of existing national policies and consultations with experts have demonstrated that the benefits of the school scheme can be enhanced if the provision of fruit is accompanied by awareness-raising and educational measures to teach children the importance of good eating habits. Encouragement will also be given to networking between different national authorities which run successful school fruit schemes. These already exist in some EU countries, and take many different forms. But there is much more that can be done and this EU scheme provides a perfect basis to get new programmes off the ground.

The Commission is putting on the table €90 million per year for the provision of fruit and vegetables in schools. Governments would have the choice of whether to participate or not. The programmes would be co-financed, either on a 50/50 basis, or 75/25 in the so-called 'convergence regions', where GDP/capita is lower, as well as outermost regions. Member States can if they wish require a compulsory parental contribution. This money could not be used to replace existing national financing, but would encourage additional activities, be it linked to existing programmes or creating completely new initiatives. And Member States could of course add extra money if they wanted to. National authorities would have to draw up a strategy in conjunction with public health and education authorities, also involving the industry and interest groups, tailored of course to national preferences.

Information and documents on the School Fruit Scheme are available on internet at:

http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/markets/fruitveg/sfs/index_en.htm