



Agriculture, food safety, product safety and public health

March 2017

The negotiations on an agreement in the areas of agriculture, food safety, product safety and public health seek to secure closer links with the European Union (EU) along the food value chain. Additionally, they aim at a strengthened cooperation on food and product safety and on public health.

Negotiations with the EU are currently under way on various areas. The four areas under negotiation – agriculture, food safety, product safety and public health – are closely related, which is why the Federal Council decided to group them together under a single negotiating mandate. Each area of negotiation is outlined below:

Agriculture: In its bilateral negotiations on agriculture, the Federal Council is seeking better access to the EU agricultural and food markets. The talks have so far covered topics along the length of the food production chain:

- ‘upstream’ – means of production and investment (e.g. fertilisers, seeds, machines)
- agriculture per se – production of commodities (e.g. milk, fruit, cereals, livestock)
- ‘downstream’ – processing of agricultural products. This comprises initial processing, such as milk and cheese production, meat processing and milling, as well as second-level processing, which covers products such as biscuits, pasta and chocolate.

Comprehensive access to the agricultural and food markets means that there will in principle be no more customs duties on the import or export of agricultural goods and no export subsidies, and that all quotas will be abolished. Alongside the dismantling of these so-called tariff barriers, all non-tariff barriers will also be eliminated, for example various regulations with regard to production (e.g. the use of additives), product content (e.g. fruit in yoghurt) or product approval (e.g. pesticides).

The Federal Council considers that an opening up of markets in the agricultural and food sector should form part of the medium-term strategy for relations with the EU. It is convinced that securing closer links between the Swiss and EU agricultural markets would bring advantages to the Swiss agricultural and food sector, improve the competitiveness of the industry as a whole and ensure jobs in agriculture and in sectors upstream and

downstream in the production chain in the long term. The Swiss agricultural sector and food industry are themselves demanding better access to the EU markets. Dismantling non-tariff trade barriers in particular would create new export opportunities.

A controlled and monitored opening up of these markets would ensure that Switzerland’s agricultural sector would benefit from these positive aspects and not be threatened.

The trade in cheese between Switzerland and the EU has been completely liberalised since 2007. While Swiss cheese producers are able to position themselves thanks to high quality products, there is wider consumer choice, which tends to bring prices down.

It is likely, however, that steps to open up markets will at times increase pressure on Swiss farmers somewhat. Income for the agricultural sector as a whole is likely to fall rapidly in the short term. At the same time, an agreement on the reciprocal opening of markets would create better prospects of maintaining high production volumes in the medium and long terms for Swiss producers than if Switzerland were to remain isolated. Swiss products, with their high quality, have good sales prospects on the large European market.

A working group mandated by the Federal Council has designed a number of parallel measures to cushion the immediate impact of the opening up of agricultural markets. One of these will be to emphasise the strengths of the Swiss agricultural and food-processing sectors through enhancing the conditions for positioning, ensuring the quality, and marketing of premium sustainable Swiss products. In view of the current opening up of borders, the strategy that has been developed on ensuring high quality standards in Swiss agricultural and food processing is indicative of future trends. Furthermore, compensatory payments to farmers are expected to help the development to take place in a way that is socially responsible to the sector.

As regards the issue of market access, the Committee for Economic Affairs and Taxation of the National Council (CEAT-N) has adopted Committee Postulate 15.3380, 'Prospects for the dairy market', which instructs the Federal Council to submit a report about the situation and challenges of the Swiss dairy market. The report is to describe in specific detail the market opening scenarios (section 11) and the net welfare gains, namely the changes for consumers, set out in the report entitled 'Mutual sectoral market opening with the EU for all dairy products' of 14 May 2015. On 27 May 2015 the Federal Council requested the adoption of Postulate 15.3380. The National Council concurred with the Federal Council and adopted the Postulate on 17 September 2015. The Federal Council will also submit a report to the Federal Assembly.

Food safety: The mutual opening of markets in the area of foodstuffs requires measures to ensure that a high level of food safety is maintained. Incidents such as dioxin in pork or EHEC bacteria on vegetable sprouts underline the need for international coordination as well as swift and comprehensive information to the public about possible dangers. Switzerland is therefore striving, within the framework of the bilateral negotiations on food safety, for institutionalised collaboration with the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA). Based in Parma (Italy), the EFSA ensures uniform risk assessment on the basis of harmonised EU food law, thus making a rapid and coordinated procedure possible in all of the states concerned. The Federal Council's objective of participation in the Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed (RASFF) pursues the same goal. The RASFF is responsible for the exchange of information on dangerous foodstuffs or animal feed within the EU. In the autumn of 2015, a non-paper was submitted to the EU Commission as a basis for talks on matters of common concern. In the Swiss–EU joint committee meeting on the veterinary annex (annex no. 11, bilateral agricultural agreement between Switzerland and the EU) in December 2015 both parties agreed to start negotiations. In 2016, further negotiations took place and they will be continued in 2017.

Product safety: International coordination is also necessary in the non-food sector to ensure the safety of consumers and to prevent the distribution and sale of hazardous products (such as lead paint on children's toys). Switzerland is therefore negotiating participation in the EU's 'Rapid Alert System for Non Food Consumer Products' (RAPEX) in order to maintain a high level of safety for Swiss consumers. No product-safety negotiations are currently under way because there is disagreement within the EU on how product safety will be regulated within the EU in the future.

Public health: Switzerland and the EU share a common interest in deepening their cooperation in the area of public health, which up to now has been governed on a piecemeal basis. Negotiations on public health-related matters are at a relatively advanced stage. The main part of the agreement, except for the question of the institutional provisions, has been adjusted. A health agreement in the form of a cooperation agreement would mainly regulate Switzerland's participation in the new EU-wide mechanism to address cross-border health threats, the EU's multi-year health programme, and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control. The EU is making the signing of a health agreement conditional on the resolution of the outstanding issues relating to institutional issues.

In addition, in the summer of 2015 the Swiss agency for therapeutic products (Swissmedic) signed a cooperation agreement with the European Medicines Agency (EMA): In order to better protect public health, EMA and the European Commission's Directorate-General for Health and Food Safety have agreed with Swissmedic and the Federal Department of Home Affairs to exchange non-public domain information on the safety, quality and efficacy of pharmaceuticals that have already been approved or are currently in the approval process in Switzerland or the EU.

The agreement supports the efforts of the European and Swiss regulatory authorities to improve oversight of human and veterinary medicinal products.

This legally non-binding agreement builds on previous cooperation between EMA and Swissmedic during the H1N1 pandemic of 2009–2010 and the 2002 agreement on the mutual recognition of conformity tests. The agreement entered into force on 10 July 2015. It will remain in force for five years and can be extended.

Further information

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Food safety: FSVO
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Product safety: SECO
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Public health: FOPH
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