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**Reply by the European Commission on an own-initiative inquiry from the European Ombudsman on how the European Commission ensures the protection of consumers from food-related hazards through the Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed (RASFF) - Case ref. OI/1/2026/1**

## I. BACKGROUND

The EU has one of the highest food safety standards in the world – largely thanks to the solid set of EU legislation in place, to keep food and feed safe.

As part of the food safety tools, **the Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed** (RASFF) was established to ensure the exchange of information between member countries to support swift reaction by food safety authorities in case of risks to public health resulting from the food chain.

Its **legal basis** is Article 50 of Regulation (EC) N° 178/2002 also known as the General Food Law.

- RASFF was set up to allow food safety authorities to rapidly exchange information on health risks derived from food or feed so that they can take immediate action to avert the risk.
- RASFF provides a round-the-clock service to ensure that urgent notifications are sent, received and responded to collectively and efficiently.
- Vital information exchanged through RASFF can lead to products being withdrawn or recalled from the market.
- Thanks to RASFF, many food safety risks are averted before they can cause harm, from farm to fork.

While the **Commission plays a critical coordinating and oversight role**, the **primary responsibility for ensuring food safety in the EU does not lie with the Commission**, but with:

1. **Food and feed business operators** (producers, processors, distributors, and retailers), who are **legally obligated** under Regulation (EC) No 178/2002 (General Food Law) to:
    - Place **only safe products** on the market.
    - Implement **preventive controls** (e.g. Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP), traceability systems).
    - **Withdraw or recall** unsafe products when risks are identified.
    - Cooperate with **competent authorities** in risk management.
2. **National food safety authorities** (in EU Member States), which are responsible for:
    - **Official controls** (inspections, sampling, testing) at all stages of the supply chain.

- **Enforcing compliance** with EU food law, including sanctions against non-compliant operators.
- **Submitting RASFF notifications** when risks are detected, ensuring rapid information-sharing across the EU.

The European Commission's role as outlined in Implementing Regulation (EU) 2019/1715 and the Alert and Cooperation Network (ACN) standard operating procedures is to:

- **Facilitate the exchange of information** between Member States via RASFF.
- **Monitor and verify** the accuracy and follow-up of notifications.
- **Coordinate responses** to cross-border risks (e.g. EU-wide recalls, import bans).
- **Support scientific risk assessment** (with the support of EFSA) and **audit Member States' controls**.
- **Ensure consistency** in the application of EU food law across the internal market.

Thus, the **effectiveness of consumer protection** depends first and foremost on:

- The **diligence of business operators** in complying with food safety requirements.
- The **vigilance and enforcement capacity** of national authorities.
- The **timely and accurate reporting** of risks through RASFF—a **tool for cooperation**, not a substitute for national controls.

The **Commission's oversight** is essential to support **harmonisation and accountability**, but the **operational responsibility for safety** remains decentralised. Any assessment of RASFF's role in consumer protection must acknowledge this **shared governance structure**, where the Commission **supervises and supports**—but does not **replace**—the actions of operators and Member States.

## II. EUROPEAN OMBUDSMAN'S INQUIRY

On 20 April 2026, the Ombudsman informed the Commission of the decision to open an own-initiative inquiry on how the Commission ensures the protection of consumers from food-related hazards through the RASFF. The Ombudsman notably referred in this context to stakeholder concerns in relation to the functioning of this system and recent meetings with members of the European Network of Ombudsmen (ENO).

In particular, the Ombudsman asked the Commission to provide written replies to the following questions:

A) When a member of the RASFF network has information relating to the existence of a serious direct or indirect risk deriving from food and feed, it must immediately notify the Commission, which, after verifying the information, communicates it to other RASFF members. The Commission is invited to provide information about the following points:

i. How it verifies the information received.

ii. Over the past two years, how much time was needed on average for alert notifications to be circulated to RASFF members after a risk has been identified; and whether the 48-hour and 24-hour timelines for, respectively, submission by contact points and verification/transmission by the Commission were ever exceeded.

iii. Within the same timeframe, what is the average time taken by contact points to submit notifications, and for the Commission to verify and transmit them in the case of information, news, and reclassification notifications.

iv. Finally, what is the average time taken by network members to circulate border rejection notifications, which the Commission only verifies ex-post.

For questions (ii) - (iv), the Commission is invited to provide the corresponding statistical overview.

B) How does the Commission proceed if it identifies, on its own, a serious risk that has not (yet) been reported by a RASFF member? Has this ever happened, and if so, how was it handled?

C) The Commission is responsible for managing the RASFF network. In addition, the Commission is also responsible for ensuring the functioning, maintenance, support, updating or development of the software and IT infrastructure underlying iRASFF. In light of this, the Commission is invited to provide information to the Ombudsman as regards:

i. Any steps it has taken to ensure the quality and consistency (reporting patterns, timeliness) of contact points notifications - either alert notifications or other types of notifications.

ii. Whether it envisages measures to ensure that notifications take better account of monitoring of food safety by the private sector and effectively cover e-commerce.

iii. As regards iRASFF, how it ensures the system relies on the most up-to-date technology. In replying to that question, the Ombudsman would appreciate it if the Commission could provide more information about TraceMap, including how it is concretely used in relation to the RASFF, and how human oversight and compliance with the AI Act is ensured.

D) As regards the RASFF Window (including the Consumers' Portal), could the Commission explain whether it intends to improve its transparency, in particular the identification of the name of the recalled product, and the accessibility of the portal for vulnerable citizens such as older people or persons with disabilities? If the Commission does not intend to make the name of recalled products available, could it explain why its approach is different to that of Safety Gate for non-food products?

## III. THE REPLY OF THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Question A

Point i

In the context of RASFF (Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed) notifications and the Alert and Cooperation Network (ACN), the European Commission verifies the information received through a structured process outlined in Implementing Regulation (EU) 2019/1715

and the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) of the ACN. Below is a breakdown of the key verification steps:

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**1. Initial Assessment of the Notification (Implementing Regulation (EU) 2019/1715, Articles 16–20 & ACN SOPs)**

When a RASFF notification (alert, information, news or border rejection) is submitted by a member[1] via the iRASFF platform, the Commission performs the following checks:

**A. Formal and Technical Validation**

- Completeness Check: The Commission ensures the notification contains all mandatory fields as per Implementing Regulation (EU) 2019/1715, as referred to in the ACN SOPs including:
    - Competent authority in charge
    - Unique reference number.
    - Product identification (name, brand, batch/lot, barcodes).
    - Hazard description (type, level, analytical results if applicable).
    - Risk assessment (seriousness, distribution status, affected populations).
    - Measures taken (withdrawal, recall, destruction, etc.).
    - Traceability data (country of origin, consignee, distribution chain).
- Consistency Check: The Commission verifies that the information is logically consistent (e.g. correct legal basis, hazard type matches the risk assessment, classification is in line with the definition).
- Timeliness Check: Notifications must comply with defined deadlines (e.g. alert notifications must be submitted by RASFF network contact points to the Commission contact point within 48 hours of a risk being reported to them, as laid down in Article 17 of Implementing Regulation (EU) 2019/1715).

**B. Cross-Checking with Existing Data**

The Commission compares the notification against:

- Previous RASFF notifications (to identify recurring issues or linked cases).
- EFSA (European Food Safety Authority) opinions (for scientific validation of hazards).

[1] Members of the RASFF are the Commission, Member States and countries that are part of the European Economic Area, bound by the EEA agreement plus Switzerland, the European Food Safety Authority and the EFTA Surveillance Authority.

- Information in TRACES on border controls.
- Information provided by third country authorities or publicly available information if any.

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**2. Scientific and Risk-Based Verification**

**A. EFSA and Reference Laboratories Involvement**

If the hazard is novel, complex, or disputed, the Commission may:

- Request **EFSA** to conduct a rapid risk assessment (Article 50 of Regulation (EC) No 178/2002).
- Consult **EU Reference Laboratories** (EURLs) for confirmatory testing (e.g., for pesticides, mycotoxins, or microbiological contaminants).
- Seek **peer review** from other Member States via the ACN.

**B. Proportionality and Justification of Measures**

The Commission assesses whether:

- The risk classification (serious/non-serious) is justified.
- The measures taken (e.g. withdrawal, recall, destruction) are proportionate and legally sound under EU food law (e.g. Regulation (EC) No 178/2002).
- The distribution scope (local/EU-wide) is accurately reported.

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**3. Coordination with Member States and Third Countries**

**A. Clarification Requests (ACN SOP 6, Section 2)**

If information is incomplete or unclear, the Commission:

- Sends a request for clarification to the notifying member country via the iRASFF platform.
- Sets a deadline (within maximum 5 days) for a response.
- May escalate to the ACN National Contact Point if delays occur.

**B. Follow-Up Actions**

The Commission may monitor how:

- Corrective actions (e.g. withdrawals, recalls, import bans) are implemented by the responsible authorities.

- Third countries (particularly for border rejections) provide guarantees or corrective action plans to prevent recurrence.
- Market withdrawals and recalls are effectively communicated to consumers and businesses.

**C. On-Site Verification**

In case of persistent non-compliance or high-risk situations, the Commission may trigger EU audits of DG SANTE's audit service (DG SANTE Directorate F).

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**4. Data Cross-Referencing with Other EU Systems**

The Commission may verify RASFF data against:

- TRACES (Trade Control and Expert System): for import/export control consistency.
- EU Customs Risk Management System: to check for fraudulent or misdeclared shipments.
- ECDC (European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control): for foodborne outbreak linkages.
- OLAF (European Anti-Fraud Office): if food fraud (e.g., adulteration, false labelling) is suspected.
- OFIS (Organic Farming Information System): to cross-check notifications with potential health risks reported through OFIS.

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**5. Final Validation and Dissemination**

Once verified, the Commission:

- Validates the notification in the iRASFF platform (visible to all member countries).
- Issues a daily and weekly RASFF report summarising key information of all notifications.
- If insufficient or incorrect information leads the Commission to conclude that validation of the notification is not possible, the Commission will **decline** validation and may **request additional information** and resubmission.

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**Summary of Verification Steps**

1. Formal check (completeness, timeliness, consistency).
2. Scientific validation (EFSA, EURLs, risk assessment).

3. Cross-referencing (RASFF database, TRACES, EFSA opinions).
4. Member state coordination (clarifications, follow-up actions).
5. Final dissemination (validation, daily/weekly reports).

Point ii

In the period 2024-2025, analysis of the data shows an average of 1.9 days from creation of an alert notification in the iRASFF platform (draft notification saved for the first time in iRASFF by the notifying member) to escalation (formally sending) to the Commission. The system also showed that it takes on average 2.1 days from the creation of an alert notification to its validation by the Commission (after verification, which is the point at which it is sent automatically to all network members), which is on average within the 48-hour deadline. Comparing the delay for escalating the alert notification with the delay for validation allows to assess the delay for verification and onwards transmission by the Commission to the members of RASFF. The average delay for verification and transmission is the remaining 0.2 days and is therefore well within the 24-hour deadline.

Methodology: to obtain these numbers, data was extracted from the system regarding the escalation date (date of the submission to the Commission) of the notification and corrected for notifications that were originally not transmitted as alert but only later upgraded to alert.

Obviously in the above collection of alerts that add up to over two thousand in the course of the two years examined, there are cases in which the deadlines were not respected, for various reasons. It should be borne in mind however that there exists a mechanism that allows sharing the notification with all directly concerned members (and in that case systematically including the Commission) in advance of transmission to all members of the network. This mechanism is systematically used. It is therefore not so that members that are required to take rapid action are prevented from doing so due to such transmission delay.

Point iii and iv

Average delays for transmission of all types of RASFF notifications, from creation date to validation date are given in the table below:

*Table 1: transmission delays of RASFF notifications*

| Classification | Average delay (days) from creation to Commission validation | Commission verification-caused delay (days) |
|---|---|---|
| Alert | 2.1 | 0.2 |
| Information for attention | 3.8 | 0.4 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Information for follow-up | 4.3 | 0.6 |
| News | 5.9 | 0.5 |
| Border rejection | 3.4 | N/A |

Information notifications for follow-up take some more time than information for attention, on average, due to the traceability information and involvement of other member countries. News notifications typically take even more time (although there are very few such notifications) because of the unverified nature of the information which is the basis for selecting a news notification classification.

For details see the figures extracted from the Commission's databases in annex.

Question B

If the Commission identifies a serious risk on its own or decides to transmit a notification with information provided by a third party, it carries out all earlier mentioned verifications and ensures that it is in line with Implementing Regulation (EU) 2019/1715 as well as with the Standard Operating Procedures. This does happen regularly, in the period of observation 2024-2025, the Commission issued 67 RASFF notifications, of which two were later withdrawn. Nine out of the 65 (non-withdrawn) RASFF notifications were alerts. Eight of these alerts were sourced with information provided by Food Standards Agency Northern Ireland, in the frame of the special arrangement with Northern Ireland regarding RASFF and one notification with information provided by UOC Sanità Veterinaria e Igiene Alimentare - San Marino.

Question C

Point i

The ways in which the Commission works to improve quality and consistency of the RASFF notifications is outlined under Question A, where reference had already been made to the Alert and Cooperation Network Standard Operating Procedures (ACN SOPs). These SOPs are updated at least yearly and contain various working instructions that provide further detail to members of the network on certain aspects of the RASFF. Updates and compliance with the SOPs are discussed in working group meetings with the ACN members held at least twice a year.

The inquiry referred to in footnote 20 references two ECA Special Reports. The first report quoted dates back to 2010, which bears little relevance for the way RASFF operates nowadays, as in the meantime the comments of the ECA were fully addressed in the Commission's reply. The second quoted ECA report, that is more recent, points out the uneven reporting in the AAC network, not RASFF, therefore this observation is not relevant for this inquiry.

The varying numbers of notifications between members of the network of RASFF is not necessarily a token of the underperformance of the least notifying members, as it is the result of a whole set of factors that may influence the notification rate of a certain country including trade volumes and authorities' structure and organisation. It should be noted that only part of the notifications in RASFF are mandatory.

Point ii

It has been noticeable that over the years (Table 2), company own-checks have increasingly become the basis of RASFF notifications, pointing to the development of a culture of information and transparency between business operators and authorities. Authorities and the Commission closely verify the reliability of this data before forwarding it in the network.

*Table 2: evolution of company own-check triggered RASFF notifications*

| Year | Company own-checks |
|---|---|
| 2017 | 552 |
| 2018 | 685 |
| 2019 | 726 |
| 2020 | 1093 |
| 2021 | 1151 |
| 2022 | 932 |
| 2023 | 981 |
| 2024 | 1182 |
| 2025 | 1379 |

Collecting information on e-commerce controls requires specific and specialised data. Already in 2017, the Commission had taken measures to ensure that iRASFF was adapted to the needs of e-commerce control. In recent years e-commerce-related RASFF notifications have increased (Table 3). The recent PCA (Prioritised Control Action), run together with Customs services on food supplements in 2025, has allowed to gain more experience on notifying e-commerce issues detected through border controls. In addition, web crawlers developed for other networks in the Commission are being evaluated for use and adaptation to food safety controls.

*Table 3: evolution of e-commerce related RASFF notifications*

| Year | e-commerce related |
|---|---|
| 2017 | 205 |
| 2018 | 187 |
| 2019 | 276 |
| 2020 | 190 |
| 2021 | 289 |
| 2022 | 259 |
| 2023 | 266 |
| 2024 | 307 |
| 2025 | 414 |

Point iii

To enhance the crisis preparedness and incident coordination capabilities as well as updating to the latest technologies, the iRASFF NT (New Technology) project has been launched in 2025, in tight collaboration and as part of the European Crisis Management Platform (ECMP) programme, which is a collaboration of European Commission services to design and develop a new corporate platform as the key instrument for the EU's crisis management capability.

The project will renew the current iRASFF (Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed) as a workspace on the ECMP, enabling faster, safer, and more coordinated management of agri-food risks and non-compliances across the European Union.

iRASFF NT will streamline incidents intake, assessment and cooperation among Member States, improving timeliness and quality of decisions that ultimately protect EU citizens.

The project targets full operational readiness by Q4 2029, in line with the ECMP planning. The projected cost for the iRASFF NT component of the ECMP amounts to 5.5 million euros plus a projected 1.7 million euros in contribution to the ECMP programme for the core functions.

TraceMap is a DG SANTE analytical support tool used to assist policy officers in analysing food safety and food fraud cases. TraceMap processes information linked to notifications entered in iRASFF. The tool helps identify potentially relevant entities, such as companies,

products, countries, lots and hazards, in both structured database fields and unstructured free-text fields and attachments. It also identifies links between the entities found. Users can work with the processed information through both a search interface and a graph representation. This allows them to explore the information more efficiently and to build or refine traceability maps for specific cases. It does not introduce fundamentally new analyses; rather, it automates and systematises processes that were previously carried out manually. Its added value lies in its ability to process all available data with greater precision and, above all, at a much higher speed.

Furthermore, the tool is not limited to iRASFF alone, but also draws on additional sources, including the TRACES database, all part of the IMSOC regulation, thereby significantly broadening the scope of the information analysed.

Meaningful human oversight is ensured, as users can trace the output back to the underlying source material and verify the extracted information against the original data. Thus, the tool is assistive in nature, and responsibility for the analysis and any follow-up remains with the competent users.

Concerning the use of up-to-date technology, DG SANTE seeks to ensure that TraceMap relies on current, supported and appropriate technologies. Its design provides for the use of recent stable versions of the core search and graph components and of recent and suitable AI capabilities where these are appropriate for the tool's purpose. To this end, developments in relevant technologies are reviewed regularly in order to assess whether they can improve the quality of data processing. New or updated technical capabilities are assessed iteratively against operational, security, robustness and compliance requirements. Overall, the objective is to ensure that the system remains fit for purpose and technically current, and improves over time, while remaining properly governed.

As regards compliance with the AI Act, DG SANTE considers TraceMap to be a non-high-risk AI system and has assessed it within that framework, including with regard to user information, human oversight and the ability of users to verify outputs against the underlying source material. Governance and compliance measures are in place covering AI literacy, human oversight, data governance, logging, monitoring, security and robustness. These measures are implemented in practice, for example, by informing and training users on the role and limitations of AI-supported processing; enabling users to verify outputs against the underlying source material; involving the relevant business and data-owning services in the design and oversight of the tool; keeping technical logs to support auditing and monitoring; and completing a data protection impact assessment. In addition, the operation of the tool is subject to regular supervision, and user feedback is taken into account when reviewing the quality and reliability of the outputs.

Question D

The RASFF Window's limited product identification reflects its design as an inter-authority alert system, **not a consumer recall tool**. Providing product identification details in case of a risk to human or animal health is the legal duty of national authorities and businesses (as supervised by the authorities) under the General Food Law (Article 10), while RASFF ensures rapid information and coordination—prioritising speed and cross-border action over exhaustive public detail. For complete recall information, consumers may consult **national food safety agencies' websites**, where national authorities are to publish operator-provided details, as required by EU law.

The Commission needs to balance the transparency of the alert system against the good functioning of the system, which builds on **trust and voluntary cooperation** by business operators. Typically, in the food chain, contaminations that occur are not easily ascribed to one particular operator or the product manufacturer and are not necessarily inherent to its production process or recipe, meaning that contamination is more often **limited to certain batches** of product rather than to the product as such. Also, findings may sometimes be **contradictory or uncertain**, requiring further verification[2]. This is much less the case for non-food products as reported in Safety Gate, which explains the difference in communication policy between both systems.

As regards accessibility of the RASFF Window public portal, migration to the latest version of the Commission's eUI standard, as implemented in a new upcoming version (next release planned for the beginning of July 2026) will improve and fix most issues regarding accessibility. The accessibility statement will be updated accordingly.

## IV. CONCLUSION

The elements detailed in the reply above demonstrate that concerns regarding delays in the RASFF alerts or inconsistent reporting by members of the network are unfounded and illustrate the Commission's strong engagement and coordinating role in the network. As regards transparency of the data, the Commission ensures that the balance between transparency and confidentiality, needed for the system to operate efficiently, is carefully observed. Furthermore, the quality, accuracy and completeness of data sent through the RASFF are primary aspects of this system that the Commission gives high priority to and continuously seeks to improve.

[2] As an illustration, reference is made to the Commission Staff Working Document SANCO/13004/2011 on Lessons learned from the 2011 outbreak of Shiga toxin-producing *Escherichia coli* in sprouted seeds