

For Immediate Release



Participants at AUB symposium on food safety urge consumers to complain in defense of their rights

Beirut, Lebanon- 15/03/2011 - Enhancing food safety standards in Lebanon will not only protect the local consumer but also open up a number of trade opportunities for food manufacturers, said participants at an AUB symposium on food safety and consumer rights.

AUB Professor Jad Chaaban from the Faculty of Agricultural and Food Sciences (FAFS) rang the alarm bells on the importance of enhancing food safety in Lebanon, noting that a number of food manufacturers and establishments currently do not have the proper licenses to produce or sell their products. As an example, he said that less than 50 of some 800 water bottling companies currently on the Lebanese market actually have licenses. Moreover, a large number of Lebanese food products are rejected in the United States and Europe because they do not meet the required standards, he said.

Chaaban was speaking at the Consumer Protection and Food Safety Symposium, held at AUB on March 15, 2011 to mark World Consumer Rights Day. Attended by a full house of about 250 people from various universities, ministries, and the private sector, the symposium was organized by the Ministry of Economy and Trade/Consumer Protection Directorate, in collaboration with FAFS and the Lebanese Association for Food Safety.

Although the public sector has intensified its efforts to enhance food safety in Lebanon over the past few years, their impacts have been partially stunted due to stalls in passing a comprehensive food safety law which has been sitting in Parliament for over five years, participants said.

Chaaban said that experts from the faculty had joined a public-private sector committee in 2001 to devise a law that would put in place comprehensive guidelines for food safety. The result was a bill that was endorsed by the Cabinet in 2006, but has been shelved by Parliament ever since.

Fouad Fleifel, acting director-general of the Ministry of Economy and Trade which houses the Directorate of Consumer Rights, showed in numbers how the directorate has managed to improve inspection and monitoring over the past few years after raising the number of inspectors under its command.

Whereas only a couple of hundred visits were conducted in 2008, more than 11,000 inspector visits were carried out in 2010, resulting in at least 400 fines, said Fleifel.

Among the directorate's top achievements is the creation of a complaints hotline reached on call center number 1739, which allows consumers to tip off the directorate of any foul play. Fleifel considers the preliminary feedback on the hotline as highly positive, saying that whereas consumers would not dare tip off the directorate prior to the creation of the hotline,

now more than 1300 serious complaints are being processed per year, 87 percent of which are being successfully resolved.

Fleifel noted that more than 45 percent of complaints are food-safety-related.

As a result of its efforts and studies, the ministry has recently banned the import of three unsafe products: baby bottles containing Bisphenol A, a toxic substance used in some plastics; Bull shot, an energy product that is sniffed and is said to promote the consumption of drugs; and Healthy Shisha, a nargileh brand that was shown to be more harmful to health than regular nargilehs or cigarettes, themselves established to cause cancer.

The good news is that the directorate is building its capacities and is now hooked onto a global alert system that automatically informs it of any additions to the database of banned or revoked products.

In parallel, LIBNOR, the Lebanese Standards Institution, has developed more than 1800 standards in various sectors to help improve quality.

“Standards are the basic and essential tool for quality infrastructure,” said Lana Dargham, LIBNOR director-general. “They facilitate the exchange of goods and services and provide environmental and consumer protection.”

Meanwhile, George Nasrawi, president of the food industries’ association, called on consumers to increase their awareness about labeling and other specifications in order to get the best value for their money.

He also noted that the prohibitively high cost of applying for international standards certification such as the ISO certification is preventing industries from improving the quality of their production and hence their access to markets abroad.

AUB Nutrition and Food Science Professor Zeina Kassaify highlighted the role that universities can play in improving food safety through high-quality research, education and outreach.

Kassaify noted that AUB has been very active on all fronts, contributing to policy development, offering expert consultations, and building the capacity of future generations as well as farmers and manufacturers currently working in food and agriculture.

For Jihad Samra, the vice president of the recently-created Lebanese Association for Food Safety, the consumer is the ultimate watchdog.

“How do you defend your rights? The first thing you should do is complain,” he said. “It’s not enough to nag amongst ourselves; but we have to act like responsible citizens and lodge official complaints for things to improve.”

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Note to Editors

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Founded in 1866, the American University of Beirut bases its educational philosophy, standards, and practices on the American liberal arts model of higher education. A teaching-centered research university, AUB has more than 600 full-time faculty members and a student body of more than 7,000 students. AUB currently offers more than 100 programs leading to the bachelor's, master's, MD, and PhD degrees. It provides medical education and training to students from throughout the region at its Medical Center that includes a full service 420-bed hospital.

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