COMMISSION RECOMMENDATION
of 20 February 2003
on the protection and information of the public with regard to exposure resulting from the 
continued radioactive caesium contamination of certain wild food products as a consequence of 
the accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power station
(notified under document number C(2003) 510)
(2003/120/EC)

THE COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES,

Having regard to the Treaty establishing the European Atomic 
Energy Community, and in particular Article 38(1), and the 
second indent of Article 124 thereof,

Having regard to the opinion of the Group of Experts 
appointed by the Scientific and Technical Committee pursuant 
to Article 31 of the Treaty,

Whereas:

(1) Following the accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power 
station on 26 April 1986, considerable quantities of 
radioactive materials were released into the atmosphere.

(2) The fallout of radioactive caesium from the accident at 
the Chernobyl nuclear power station has affected a wide 
range of third countries.

(3) Significant fallout has affected certain parts of the terri-
tories of a number of Member States and countries 
applying for accession to the European Union.

on the conditions governing imports of agricultural 
products originating in third countries following the 
accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power-station (1), as 
last amended by Regulation (EC) No 616/2000 (2), fixed 
for agricultural products in third countries intended for 
human consumption, maximum permitted levels of 
radioactive caesium with which imports must comply 
and in connection with which checks are carried out by 
Member States.

(5) In a statement to the Council, on 12 May 1986 in 
connection to the adoption of Council Regulation (EEC) 
No 1707/86 of 30 May 1986 on the conditions 
governing imports of agricultural products originating in 
third countries following the accident at the Chernobyl 
nuclear power-station (4), Member States committed 
themselves to apply the same maximum permitted levels 
to trade within the Community.

1999 laying down detailed rules for the application of 
Council Regulation (EEC) No 737/90 on the conditions 
governing imports of agricultural products originating in 
third countries following the accident at the Chernobyl 
nuclear power-station (5), as last amended by Regulation 
(EC) No 1608/2002 (5), has, inter alia, introduced specific 
conditions strengthening the controls on the imports of 
non-cultivated mushrooms from a number of third 
countries.

(7) Member States have applied and still apply when neces-
sary, similar checks and conditions for the placing on 
the market of foodstuffs emanating from their national 
agro-industrial food supply chains in particular with 
regard to meat from sheep and reindeer.

(8) The measures in situ in the territories of the Member 
States flow from existing legal obligations set out in 
laying down basic safety standards for the protection of 
the health of the workers and the general public against 
the dangers arising from ionising radiation (6) and in 
Articles 35 and 36 of the Euratom Treaty.

(9) Natural and semi-natural ecosystems such as forests and 
wooded areas generally are the natural habitat of wild 
game, berries and mushrooms and such ecosystems tend 
to retain radioactive caesium in a cyclic exchange 
between upper soil layers (litter), bacteria, microfauna, 
microflora and vegetation. In addition, the soil of such 
ecosystems which consists for the most part of organic 
matter tends to increase the biological availability of 
radioactive caesium.

(10) The forest plants likely to be consumed by man are the 
edible fruit species, in particular wild berries like bilber-
ries, cloudberries, cranberries, raspberries, blackberries 
and wild strawberries. Radioactive caesium contamina-
tion trends in wild berries show that contamination has 
decreased slowly or remained stable in particular in 
perennial species, since the Chernobyl accident.

Many species of edible wild mushrooms (chanterelles, bay boletus, hedgehogs and other well-known edible mushrooms), due to the impact of the nature of forest soils on the availability of radioactive caesium, continue to develop levels of radioactive caesium exceeding 600 Bq/kg. Mushrooms of the mycorrhizal species living in symbiosis with trees and having a deep-growing mycelium (Boletus edulis, for example) were affected much later by the fallout and today present very high levels of radioactive caesium contamination.

Radioactive caesium contamination also affects animal species such as wild game and carnivorous freshwater fish from lakes in areas with the highest deposition. In particular, the presence of highly contaminated species in the diet (lichen, mosses, and in particular certain species of mushrooms) clearly contributes to increasing the contamination of the wild game consuming them.

It is assumed that the duration of radioactive caesium contamination following the Chernobyl accident of a number of products originating from species living and growing in forests and other natural and semi-natural ecosystems essentially relates to the physical half-life of that radionuclide which is some 30 years and that therefore no appreciable change as regards the radioactive caesium contamination of these products will be observed in the next decades.

In recent years, data provided by some Member States to the Commission has shown that high levels of radioactive caesium could be found in wild game, berries, mushrooms and carnivorous lake fish.

The incidence of wild game meat exceeding 600 Bq/kg of radioactive caesium is slowly decreasing except for wild boar, non-negligible quantities of wild game meat originated in certain parts of the territories of a number of Member States and applicant countries continue to exceed the above limits.

In certain regions of the Federal Republic of Germany the radioactive caesium levels in meat of wild boar can be ten or more times higher than levels in roe deer or red deer. For example, the incidence of cases of wild boar exceeding 600 Bq/kg of radioactive caesium has been constantly rising since 1996 and was about 51% in 1999 with peak values exceeding 10 000 Bq/kg.

It can be assumed that parts of the territories of a number of other Member States and applicant countries, presenting similar levels of radioactive caesium deposition would have contamination levels in meat from wild game and in particular in wild boar comparable to those in the Federal Republic of Germany.

Recent data indicate that radioactive caesium concentrations remain high in carnivorous freshwater fish from lakes in areas with the highest deposition, with peak values exceeding 10 000 Bq/kg in pike and 5 000 Bq/kg in perch.

The placing on the market of edible wild products does not necessarily proceed through the agro-industrial food supply chains, the national statutory monitoring and checks could therefore be bypassed.

Member States have informed the population of the health risk resulting from consumption of certain food categories in the aftermath of the Chernobyl accident, public awareness of the continued contamination of wild food products tends to decline.

Although the implication of the contamination of wild products for the health of the general public is very low, the health risk to persons who consume large quantities of such products from affected regions cannot be neglected, and it is therefore necessary to strengthen the public awareness of those dangers.

Regulation (EC) No 178/2002 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 28 January 2002 laying down the general principles and requirements of food law, establishing the European Food Safety Authority and laying down procedures in matters of food safety has set up a system for the rapid exchange of information. It is necessary to use that system for exchanging information between the Member States on recorded cases of exceedance of the maximum permitted levels.

HEREBY RECOMMENDS:

1. For the purpose of protecting the health of the consumer, Member States should take appropriate steps to ensure that the maximum permitted levels in terms of caesium-134 and 137 referred to in Article 3 of Regulation (EEC) No 737/90 are respected in the Community for the placing on the market of wild game, wild berries, wild mushrooms and carnivorous lake fish.

2. Member States should inform the population, in regions where there is a potential for such products to exceed the maximum permitted levels, of the health risk involved.

3. Member States should inform the Commission and each other of recorded cases of such products placed on the Community market exceeding the maximum permitted levels through the Community Rapid Alert System laid down in Regulation 2002/178/EC.

4. Member States should inform the Commission and the other Member States of the action taken in response to this recommendation.

Done at Brussels, 20 February 2003.

For the Commission
Margot WALLSTROM
Member of the Commission