With regard to the plant products, the Committee concluded that the information provided on the specification, standardisation of the product and safety studies was insufficient. This confirmed an initial assessment report carried out by the national authority that received the application. Consequently, the Commission decided not to authorise the placing on the market of Stevia Rebaudiana Bertoni plants and dried leaves as food or a food ingredient ([1]).

With regard to the sweetener, the Committee expressed concerns regarding the absence of safety data about the genotoxicity potential of a metabolite of stevioside, about the specification of the compound (impurities) and about possible effects on human fertility. Therefore, the Commission did not consider it appropriate to propose the authorisation of this substance as a sweetener for use in foodstuffs.

The Joint Expert Committee on Food Additives and Contaminants of the World Health Organisation (WHO) and Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) has expressed similar concerns about stevioside as the Scientific Committee on Food.

Aspartame has also been evaluated by the Scientific Committee on Food and has been found acceptable for use as a sweetener in food. An Acceptable Daily Intake of 40 milligram per kilogram bodyweight has been set by the Committee. Accordingly, this sweetener has been authorised under Community legislation for a restricted range of foods and with maximum usage levels ([2]).

The Commission would like to reassure the Honourable Member that the size or the area of activity of the manufacturer neither influence evaluations of food additives carried out by the Scientific Committee on Food, nor will they influence future evaluations of substances for use as ingredients in food supplements.

([1]) Commission Decision 2000/196/EC of 22 February 2000 refusing the placing on the market of Stevia Rebaudiana Bertoni: plants and dried leaves as a novel food or novel food ingredient under Regulation (EC) No 258/97 of the Parliament and of the Council, OJ L 61, 8.3.2000.

([2]) Parliament and Council Directive 94/35/EC of 30 June 1994 on sweeteners for use in foodstuffs (OJ L 237, 10.9.1994).

(2001/C 261 E/103) **WRITTEN QUESTION E-0375/01**

by Luciano Caveri (ELDR) to the Commission

(15 February 2001)

Subject: Return of canis lupus to Alpine areas

The return of wolves (canis lupus) to Alpine areas, as a result of their migrating from the Italian Apennines, has met with contrasting reactions on the part of national authorities in the light of the laws of the countries concerned, so that various subterfuges have been employed to get round the inflexible Community rules according to which the wolf is a species that may not be hunted.

What are the Commission's views on the subject, and does it consider that it would be appropriate to agree on joint measures and, possibly, changes to the existing legislation?

Answer given by Mrs Wallström on behalf of the Commission

(3 April 2001)

The wolf (Canis lupus), with the exception of some populations in Spain and Greece, is included in Annex IV of the Habitats Directive ([1]) as a species of community interest for which rigorous protection is required. According to Article 12 of the same Directive, this protection includes, among others, the obligation by the Member States to prohibit, in their natural range, all forms of deliberate capture or killing of specimens in the wild and deliberate disturbance, particularly during the period of breeding, rearing, hibernation and migration.

The Habitats Directive foresees, in Article 16, the possibility for the Member States to derogate from the provisions of Article 12, provided that there is no satisfactory alternative and that the derogation is not detrimental to the maintenance of the populations of the species concerned at a favourable conservation status in their natural range. The reasons which can justify such a derogation include the prevention of serious damage, in particular to crops, livestock and other types of property, the interests of public health and public safety, or other imperative reasons of overriding public interest, including those of a social or economic nature.

Finally, for a number of years already, the Commission has financed with Life-Nature funds projects focussed on assessing the evolution of the situation of the wolf in Europe and particularly in the alpine zone, and on its conservation. These projects have studied and applied several methods of compensation to the farmers for damage eventually caused by the wolf, and of mitigation of that damage. One conclusion of these projects is that the present wolf population in the alpine region is not so large that it might create problems at the regional level, and that the damage caused is at the local level.

The Commission does not believe, therefore, that it would be helpful to work on common measures or to adjust the existing Community legislation, particularly for what refers to the Habitats Directive and its annexes.

(1) Council Directive 92/43/EEC of 21 May 1992 on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora (OJ L 206, 22.7.1992).

(2001/C 261 E/104)

WRITTEN QUESTION E-0377/01

by Luciano Caveri (ELDR) to the Commission

(15 February 2001)

Subject: BSE

There is considerable concern about the risk of 'mad cow disease' (BSE) being transmitted to human beings, an eventuality which, unfortunately, may have occurred already in the period before the introduction of specific controls; the European public is beginning to ask whether, in addition to measures rightly aimed at identifying and destroying affected animals and associated measures to prevent the spread of the disease, it would be possible to obtain an accurate estimate of the possible extent of the infection.

What kind of measures could be taken that would apply to the European public as a whole? Do tests exist that could be carried out in the course of a mass campaign to ascertain what percentage of the population is likely to have been infected by the disease? Is there any definite information concerning the transmission of the disease from one human being to another and the implications that might have for donations of blood or organs?

Answer given by Mr Byrne on behalf of the Commission

(17 April 2001)

The Honourable Member is referred to the Commission's answer to Written Questions E-3746/00 by Mrs Paulsen and Mr Olsson (1), E-4087/00 by Mr Watson (2), E-0163/01 by Mr Zappalà (3) and others, and Oral Question H-0951/00 by Mr Alavanos during question time at Parliament's January 2001 part-session (4).

At present no valid tests are available for detecting the presence of a bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) agent in humans. However, several types of test are currently being developed.