**Parliamentary Question No.129**
To ask the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food his views on the option of regulating the sale of raw milk , rather than leaving Ireland in the unique position whereby the product is banned outright; his further views on a system whereby the product is sold with visible health warnings in line with practices in other EU countries; the economic implications of allowing a situation whereby raw milk is banned in the context of the burgeoning artisan food sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Ciara Conway TD (Labour, Waterford)

For WRITTEN answer on Wednesday, 21st September, 2011.
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**REPLY**

**The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food**: (Simon Coveney)
The proposed ban on the sale of raw milk for direct human consumption is not new. Sale of raw cows milk was banned for many years (from 1997 till 2006) by my Department; and previously by most local authorities. The ban lapsed due to a change in EU legislation in 2006.

The independent scientific committee of the Food Safety Authority of Ireland and my Department’s own dairy science and veterinary experts have strongly advised that there are serious health risks associated with drinking raw milk.  Disease risks include TB, Brucellosis, E. coli O157, Campylobacter and Salmonella. There have been incidents of these in Ireland and other countries in recent years. Resulting illnesses can be serious and on occasion fatal.

The FSAI has therefore recommended that the sale of unpasteurised milk from all farm animals which is intended for direct human consumption should be prohibited; and advises that the most effective way to protect public health is to ensure that such milk is pasteurised.

The prevalence of TB in herds in Ireland puts us in a different position to most other Member States in the EU where the disease has been eradicated. It is inappropriate that Ireland should adopt the same approach to the consumption of raw milk as countries that do not have the same difficulty with TB and therefore have no associated risk.

A public consultation process was held in 2008 in relation to the proposed extension of the ban to goats and sheep milk. Seventeen submissions were received. On being reviewed, they did not provide justification to change the expert advice that a complete ban was necessary.

An outright ban will not be unique in the EU. I understand for example that Denmark and Scotland apply such a ban.

The ban will not apply to the consumption of raw milk which has not been placed on the market – e.g. a dairy farmer drinking milk from his/her own cows. Such a ban is not possible under the law and in any event would be unenforceable. However, it is recommended to avoid this practice for health reasons.

Regarding the economic implications, Ireland exports over €2bn worth of dairy products each year; and is the leading producer of infant formula with about 15% of the world market. Any food scare associated with raw Irish milk could have major implications for our dairy industry. The recent E. coli outbreak in Germany, resulting in 46 deaths, 782 cases of HUS (haemolytic uraemic syndrome, a serious kidney condition) and 3,128 known cases of VTEC, indicates the scale of possible risks associated with raw food.

It is important to note in this context that the ban will not apply to making cheese using raw milk. The cheese making process takes time and this provides an opportunity to withdraw product from sale in the event of a problem arising with the source milk. The cheese making process also prevents growth of pathogens and in some cases encourages slow decline in numbers of some pathogens. I would also like to point out that some artisan food producers are pasteurising raw whole milk and are licensed by my Department in this regard. These artisans are very successfully marketing liquid whole milk, ice cream, different flavoured yoghurts and artisan farmhouse cheeses.  I am advised by the FSAI that meaningful differences in nutritional value between pasteurised and unpasteurised milk have not been demonstrated and these artisans clearly show that pasteurised whole milk can be used in the manufacture of safe and quality dairy products.

Section 54 of the Health Act of 1947 has been identified as the appropriate primary legislation for the renewal of the ban and it is intended to bring forward a Statutory Instrument under that Act for signature by the Minister for Health. The latest indicative timeframe for the introduction of the S.I. is end 2011, which includes allowance for a 3-month EU notification period.