

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

### OFFICIAL PERMISSIBLE LIMITS FOR RADIOACTIVE CONTAMINATION IN FOODSTUFFS

As a consequence of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, the European Union set maximum limits on the level of radioactive contamination permitted in foodstuff imports from countries outside the EU; regarding total cesium radionuclides, these limits stand at 370 becquerels/kilogram for baby food and milk products and at 600 becquerels/kilogram for other foodstuffs. These limits also apply to food traded within the EU. In response to the Fukushima disaster, the EU provisionally set stricter permissible limits at 200 and 500 becquerels respectively for imports from Japan.

**Table 1: Total cesium limits in September 2011**

	<b>Baby food and milk products</b>	<b>Other foodstuffs</b>
<b>EU limits for imports from countries outside the EU</b>	370 Bq/kg	600 Bq/kg
<b>EU limits for imports from Japan</b>	200 Bq/kg	500 Bq/kg
<b>Japanese limits</b>	200 Bq/kg	500 Bq/kg
<b>Limits called for by foodwatch/IPPNW</b>	8 Bq/kg	16 Bq/kg

**Table 2: Limits for iodine-131 in September 2011**

	<b>Baby food</b>	<b>Milk products</b>	<b>Other foodstuffs</b>	<b>Liquid foodstuffs</b>
<b>EU limits for imports from countries outside the EU</b>	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
<b>EU limits for imports from Japan</b>	100 Bq/kg	300 Bq/kg	2000 Bq/kg	300 Bq/kg
<b>Japanese limits</b>	100 Bq/kg	300 Bq/kg	2000 Bq/kg	300 Bq/kg
<b>Limits called for by foodwatch/IPPNW</b>	0 Bq/kg	0 Bq/kg	0 Bq/kg	0 Bq/kg

Currently permissible limits in the EU and Japan are too high and contradictory, and they are influenced by commercial interests. They are also in conflict with fundamental European principles governing rights and legislation.

### **1. Official limits are too high**

- There are no 'safe' limits. Any dose of radiation, no matter how small, can lead to illness and death. The setting of any permissible limits always represents a decision on the number of fatalities that will be tolerated. According to calculation models used by the International Commission on Radiological Protection (ICRP), the dietary intake of the lowest levels of radioactive contamination permitted in food in the EU – reflecting the official limits that apply to imports from Japan – would lead to at least roughly 150,000 additional cancer deaths in Germany alone each year. If all the food consumed by the German population were contaminated to an average of only five percent of the officially permitted level, statistically at least 7,700 additional deaths could be expected each year.
- Germany's Radiation Protection Ordinance allows for a maximum effective radiation dose of altogether 1 millisievert (mSv) per year for individuals when nuclear power plants are operating under normal conditions. A maximum of 0.3 mSv per year is permitted for each single exposure pathway – such as the discharge of radioactive material through air or water. In stark contrast, the official European Union limits set on contamination in food accept exposure values that are much higher, namely an effective annual dose of at least 33 mSv for adults and 68 mSv for children.
- These values contradict the principle of radiation minimization, according to which all unnecessary exposure to radiation should be avoided. There is enough food to be had in Europe and for this reason there is no need to allow the import of highly contaminated food products from regions affected by the Chernobyl or Fukushima disasters.

## **2. Contradiction**

- Other countries have to some extent set much stricter limits, as in Belarus and Ukraine, both severely affected by the Chernobyl disaster. Foodstuffs that can no longer be marketed there can be legally imported by EU countries and sold within Europe.
- Newer, more stringent EU value limits apply only to foodstuffs imported from Japan. Products that are more highly contaminated and therefore not permitted for direct import from Japan can still be sold in the EU if they detour first through other countries outside the EU.

## **3. Influence of commercial interests**

- In an agreement made more than 50 years ago, the World Health Organization (WHO) relinquished jurisdiction to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on defining the health damage caused by radiation. The declared aim of the IAEA is the expansion and promotion of nuclear energy. The International Commission on Radiological Protection (ICRP) and the European Atomic Energy Community (EURATOM) are dominated by the nuclear industry and radiologists.

## **4. Conflict with the fundamental principles governing EU rights and legislation**

- The official European Union limits on contamination in foodstuffs tolerate substantial risks to the health and life of EU citizens. This is a violation of fundamental rights in the European Union, especially of citizens' rights to life and integrity, enshrined in the EU's Charter of Fundamental Rights. This means that the European Commission is particularly obliged to lower official permissible contamination limits.
- The obligation to set more stringent limits also arises from the precautionary principle, anchored in the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) with regard to environmental policy, which explicitly includes preventive health protection. The protection of the environment and human health is therefore part of primary legislation in the EU and is prescribed as a mandatory target for the institutions of the community of states.

- The Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) also calls for a high level of protection for European citizens, which is invoked in legislative acts for setting value limits. But currently valid limits on radioactive contamination fall far short of providing a ‘high’ level of protection.