



Meat hygiene inspection: Some examples of its evolution since the 2000s, what lessons can be learned?

By Mr. Stéphane Touzet, General Secretary of the EWFC (January 2026)

Introduction

The purpose of this presentation is not to expose in detail the European meat inspection regulation neither to deliver confidential information, but rather to offer a practical observation of the rules last evolution, and their implementation in recent years, through a few examples.

I will then attempt to present the lessons that EWFC have learned from these developments, to identify some perspectives for progress and the pitfalls to avoid.

EWFC stands for “*European Working Community for Food-Inspection and Consumer Protection*”. Founded in 1991, the EWFC is an organization that brings together professional associations and organizations that work to deliver official Food Safety-Inspections in the Member-States of the EU and UK. The Community’s Aims and Objectives are to promote the professional interests of its members, exchange and share experience, good practices and continued training, learning and co-operation with EWFC members and other expert organizations at EU Level.

As EWFC Secretary General, my ambition is not to be completely objective, but at least to be honest.

1 European Regulation on Meat Inspection: Recent Developments

The safety and quality of meat products are essential for public health and consumer confidence across Europe. This also constitutes both an asset and a burden for states and operators in an international competitive market. The European Union has long established a comprehensive regulatory framework for meat inspection to ensure food safety, animal welfare, and hygiene standards.

Recently, several significant changes have been introduced to adapt to new scientific insights, technological advances, and changing market consequences, but also to face successive crises. **Regulation (EU) 2017/625 and 627 plus (EU) 2019/624** update the rules for official controls and meat inspection, performed to ensure the application of food and feed law, including animal health and welfare :

Modernization of Official Controls

- Shift to risk-based controls: Focus on higher-risk products and operators.
- Greater digitalization: Digital tools enhance traceability and data sharing.
- Improved **cooperation**: Collaboration between national authorities and private inspection.

Animal Welfare Integration

- Animal welfare now integral during **ante-mortem inspection**.
- Mandates humane handling and stress reduction to improve meat quality and welfare.

Advances in Inspection Techniques and Technology

- **Implementation of new diagnostic methods**: Rapid and sensitive testing technologies, such as PCR (Polymerase Chain Reaction) and immunoassays, are increasingly used to detect pathogens and contaminants in meat.
- **Blockchain and traceability**: The EU is encouraging blockchain technology adoption to ensure full traceability from farm to fork.
- **Remote and automated inspections**: Pilot projects are testing remote video inspections and artificial intelligence-based systems to assist official veterinarians, especially where workforce shortages exist.

2 Organization and evolution of the implementation of meat inspection in three examples: The Netherlands, Germany and France

France

Organization :

In France, meat inspection is organized under a centralized and public model, managed by the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Sovereignty, through the General Directorate for Food, and the departmental services under the authority of the prefects. Such a centralized organization contributes to better national consistency and uniform application of EU regulations, it also preserves independence.

However, official authorities have sometimes to face criticism regarding administrative rigidity, lack of flexibility to adapt to local realities.

Implementation :

Inspections are exclusively conducted by public officials (OV and OA). This ensures independence from economic operators, but faces several structural challenges:

- Shortage of official veterinary inspectors, especially in rural areas;
- Aging workforce and lack of appeal for inspection careers (remuneration and career development, hardship, workload, isolation...);
- Budget constraints impacting operational efficiency (reduced staff, outdated equipment...).

Persistent Weaknesses and Criticism :

Despite its strong public framework, the French system faces recurring issues:

- Uneven distribution of inspections between small and large abattoirs;
- Difficulty in ensuring rules application and full traceability in certain sectors (poultry, sheep);
- The close administrative link between inspection services and prefectures is sometimes seen as compromising independence under local economic pressure;
- Lack of transparency regarding the follow-up of non-compliance findings.

Ongoing Reforms :

Since 2020, France has initiated several reforms:

- Digital transformation of inspection and reporting systems;
- Revision of risk-based targeting tools;
- Strengthening of continuous training for inspectors (One Health approach, zoonosis management...),
- Workshop to develop the attractiveness of inspection professions...
- Pilot projects on partially automated visual inspections

Germany

Organization :

The meat inspection system in Germany is organized in a decentralized manner and is carried out by the federal states through the districts. There may be some differences in implementation.

Implementation :

Since the 1990s, the intensity of inspections has been continuously reduced for cost reasons, which means that the inspection of meat is not always correctly guaranteed, even if it is still mainly carried out by official personnel. Yet in the 2000s, some Länder have relied on

independent veterinarians or private service providers to conduct certain tasks (in slaughterhouses, storage facilities, transportation, etc.).

Persistent Weaknesses and Criticism :

Despite its proximity to the realities on the ground and its local responsiveness, this organization is criticized for its lack of efficacy and uniformity in the application of rules, uneven quality and difficult coordination at the national level.

- In large slaughterhouses especially, the official inspectors are sometimes only minimally employed, with inadequate social security, making the inspection personnel potentially defenseless against the influence of slaughterhouse operators.
- Piece-rate compensation (paid per animal inspected) especially in small abattoirs, which may compromise thoroughness.
- Doubts about the training and oversight of outsourced staff. The training takes only six months, and the trainees often do not have adequate prior education in food safety, which leads to the uneven level the newly trained inspection personnel. There is no standardized continuous training.

Germany has also experienced several major food safety scandals: 2008 spoiled meat reintroduced into the legal supply chain; 2011 E. coli outbreak in Hamburg (linked to sprouts but revealing failures in traceability); 2020 appalling sanitary and labor conditions in industrial slaughterhouses, especially due to mass subcontracting and reliance on precarious foreign labor.

Ongoing Reforms :

Since 2021, Germany has been considering several reforms, but none have actually been implemented.

- Ban on subcontracting in large slaughterhouses: Meat Industry Workers Protection Act, limited to meat industry employees only.
- Project to improve continuous training for inspectors.

The Netherlands

Unlike the two previous examples, the organization in the Netherlands has undergone several extremely significant reorganizations since the 2000s. I will approach them chronologically to arrive at the current organization.

At the beginning of the 2000s, meat inspection in the Netherlands operated under a fragmented system. In 2002, the Dutch government initiated a major reform by creating a centralized authority responsible for the safety of food and consumer products called VWA.

In 2006, to separate the execution of inspection tasks from official responsibility, the VWA outsourced certain duties to a new organization called KDS. KDS was funded by industry stakeholders. Operating under a controlled delegation model, KDS was conducting post-mortem inspections in red meat slaughterhouses. Ante-mortem inspections and official decisions remained the exclusive responsibility of VWA veterinarians.

After the “Horsemeat food fraud Scandal” (2013), The VWA faced criticism for budget cuts and reduced field presence and insufficient sanctions.

From 2017, modern tools were adopted for pathogen control and the VWA engaged collaborations to improve detection and crisis response.

Yet, between 2019 and 2022, several controversies arose concerning KDS: *independence and transparency, increased tariffs, calls for better alignment of OAs with VWA veterinarians...* These developments led to a political consensus on the need for structural reform.

In 2022, the Dutch government decided to integrate KDS into the renewed “Netherlands Food and Consumer Product Safety Authority” (NVWA). The objectives were to establish a unified supervisory chain, to strengthen independence from industry influence, and to improve transparency, efficiency, and staff rotation. This gradual integration is supported by a social plan for KDS employees, revamped training programs, and an operational reorganization around a new division within the NVWA.

Automated inspection technologies, artificial intelligence (AI) for risk targeting, and connected sensors are gradually being introduced.

3 Different approaches for convergent results?

The Netherlands has transitioned from a dual oversight model to a unified authority, while France remains firmly centralized. Germany's organization makes coordination and evolution more challenging.

The French organization is unique among the three, as it maintains a centralized public inspection system. All inspections are normally carried out uniformly by official veterinarians and their assistants.

Despite various attempts, the German model appears less easily transferable on a large scale in its current form, due to limited resources, divergent practices and a dependence on low-cost solutions.

The Netherlands experimented with semi-private delegation, until its reintegration into NVWA began in 2022.

While all three countries have undertaken structural and technological modernization, not all are doing so at the same pace. The Netherlands is moving toward a fully unified, high-tech, risk-based system, aiming for cost-efficiency and automatic supervision. Despite various attempts, Germany's model appears less scalable in its actual form, due to limited resources, divergent practices, and reliance on low cost solutions.

France seeks to modernize within its existing public framework, emphasizing training, digital tools, and regulatory precision. However, it faces challenges in workforce renewal and socio-economic pressure.

Conclusion

To slightly caricature, the history of meat inspection can be summed up as follows: reduction in inspection costs and resources, sanitary crisis or consumer crisis, re-increase in inspection resources, period of calm, reduction in inspection costs and resources, crisis, and the whole thing starts again...

Modernization is unavoidable, but it doesn't mean deregulation of official controls. In particular the move to focus on high risk operators and reduce or almost completely stop controls on some operators that are currently compliant.

Advocates of this approach present no evidence that such compliant producers will not lower their standards when their level of official supervision is reduced.

There are examples of very prestigious companies, not under continuous official supervision, that were guilty of very serious breaches of regulations which put consumers at risk i.e.: Salmonella in Cadbury chocolate in 2007 which affected 30 people, for which they were fined £1 million; and the European Nestle mineral water scandal in 2024, for which they were fined 2 million Euros."

This does not mean that the organization of meat inspection should not evolve. But we conclude that meat inspection must remain under the permanent control of qualified, independent and human personnel who benefit from the necessary resources to properly carry out their responsibilities.

New technologies offer opportunities to improve the security and transparency of meat inspections, reduce the arduousness of tasks, and undoubtedly increase the attractiveness of meat inspection jobs. Reforms of any kind encounter resistance. This resistance is certainly often linked to a natural resistance to change and questioning, but it is primarily a matter of the expertise of meat inspectors, who are confronted with the reality of the workplace on a daily basis, and who therefore know what works and what doesn't. For example, if technology can probably assist meat inspection, it is unacceptable to hear that video inspections and artificial intelligence-based systems could assist official veterinarians where workforce shortages exist, which can mean in place of inspectors.

Also, while modernization is inevitable, it can only be beneficial if it is organized by involving the meat inspection staff.