

New FASFC CEO Christine Romeyns: "We want to be a partner, not a police officer"

Christine Romeyns, Chief Executive Officer, FASFC

Alexander Platteeuw, A+ Quality

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Recorded in French, translated into English

Alexander Platteeuw

The following interview was recorded entirely in French. If you would like to listen to it in your own language, Dutch, you are best served by YouTube.

Welcome to Better FoodSafe Than Sorry, the podcast for the curious food safety enthusiast, with interviews, conversations with specialists and in-depth information about everything happening in the industry, the supervisory authorities and everything around them. I am Alexander Platteeuw of A+ Quality, the consultancy and training firm specialised in food safety management, with more than 25 years of experience in the food world.

Our guest today knows the federal administration inside out. She started her career as a social inspector, never shying away from complex cases involving social fraud and human trafficking, and quickly took over the leadership of her team. She then joined the cabinets of several ministers, where she contributed her expertise in social law, SMEs, the self-employed and agriculture, while also being the public voice as spokesperson and director of communication. Her career led her to management positions within large federal institutions, where she coordinated HR, ICT, communication, facilities, legal affairs and budget management.

In other words: a blend of expertise in operational management, policy development and communication, all brought together in an impressive career. Today we welcome someone who knows exactly what it takes to reconcile control, safety and trust in the food chain. It is a great honour to receive the new Chief Executive Officer of the FASFC in our podcast. Welcome, Christine Romeyns.

Christine Romeyns

Thank you, Alexander, and thank you for that introduction, it goes straight to my heart. It is a pleasure to be here and to be able to discuss together these things that have such an impact on our society.

Alexander Platteeuw

What motivated you to accept this position, and which values do you want to anchor as Chief Executive Officer within the agency?

Christine Romeyns

I did more than accept this position, because mandate positions require you to pass a considerable number of examinations before being appointed.

Personally, I have always wanted to work for the state, because I wanted my job to have a concrete impact on citizens. And how better to support citizens than by guaranteeing what is on their plate? As you explained, my entire professional career led me to this place. Fieldwork taught me the importance of the concrete, the importance of pedagogy and of dialogue with operators. My experience in ministerial cabinets showed me what it means to live through a crisis from the inside: I was in the cabinet during the fipronil crisis, under the gaze of the

media, of citizens and of the international community. And managing various services, whether inspection services, even if that was in social security, or laboratories at the National Institute of Criminalistics and Criminology, reminded me that science and expertise must inform all of our decisions. I think the diversity of the roles I have held has allowed me to understand the expectations and the constraints of every actor in the chain.

As for values, the ones we want to anchor together with the management board within the agency are first of all the five federal values. The general interest, because our mission is to protect public health and the food chain for everyone. Social responsibility, because every decision must take its economic, social and environmental impact into account. Respect, because it is the basis of solid relationships, whether within our teams, with our partners or with citizens. Trust, because that is essential for the actors in the food chain. And professionalism.

But in my view, two values need to be added to those five federal values: the strength of the human being, and co-creation. The strength of the human being, because behind every inspection, behind every analysis, behind every decision we take, there are women and men doing a job that exists for the whole chain. And co-creation, because today we will not achieve food safety on our own. We will not achieve food safety without partnership.

For me these values are not theory, they are something we have to put into practice. I can tell you, for example, that in the context of the self-checking guides for B2C, we are working in partnership with the B2C actors, but also with actors at other levels of the chain, who give us leads and show us what they have done. Because the idea of building together and respecting each other is to make us all progress together.

Alexander Platteuw

I am very glad to hear that. In my view, that is exactly the added value of co-creation: working together and putting the knowledge on the table raises the level of the result.

In your view, what are the biggest challenges for, let us say, the next five years?

Christine Romeyns

I think the challenges ahead of us are enormous, but they are also fascinating.

A first area concerns us directly as an agency: we have to change our posture. We need to be seen increasingly as partners, and no longer simply as an agency of control and sanction. Not exclusively, mind you: we will always be an agency of control and sanction, that is necessary. But we do not want to be only that.

Secondly, we are going to have to think globally, simply because globalisation is here. Our ingredients travel from one continent to another. When you buy a pizza in a supermarket, we know that it can carry ingredients from up to 68 different countries. So the risks multiply, and for us that means anticipating more, analysing, providing assurance and spotting emerging trends.

The third area is following citizens. We are not going to change the new consumption habits, we have to follow them. We must be ever more transparent and more sustainable. We also have to adapt to new ways of consuming: the figures on animal and plant proteins, the consumption of high-protein products and every other novelty. Take the example of the removal of certain additives, which requires more in-depth analysis of a number of products. That is an adaptation, and it is a challenge in order to keep responding better.

So: change posture, think globally, follow citizens, and finally act for the planet. Climate change is here, and it affects our production, our safety and our resilience. Let me take one example: animal diseases. Controlling them is an essential mission of the FASFC. But today we see diseases establishing themselves in Belgium, and in Europe more generally, that used to be studied in veterinary faculties as tropical diseases and that are now becoming our reality in the field. You only have to look at the problem France and Italy are currently facing with lumpy skin disease, a disease that did not exist in Europe ten years ago and on which we have to anticipate and find new ways of operating.

So the challenges will clearly be numerous and the coming years will not necessarily be the easiest. The world is changing, we will have to change with it and anticipate it. The food chain is becoming more and more complex, but I think the agency has the maturity to handle that.

Alexander Platteeuw

But there are also, as we hear in the media, the austerity measures at federal level. What influence is that going to have on the operation of the FASFC?

Christine Romeyns

We have already absorbed a linear saving, like the majority of administrations: a linear saving of 1.8 %. Was it easy? It was not simple at all. But we thought it through, we worked on it, we reviewed our way of working. We told ourselves it was a challenge and not solely a setback, and we got there, we are managing to absorb it.

Now, if further savings were to be requested, that would be more complex and we would have to study how to handle them. But in any case, one thing is certain: the FASFC will continue to fully carry out its food safety mission, and that is a certainty.

Alexander Platteeuw

Some companies tell me things after they have had a visit from an FASFC inspector. They say there is a lack of uniformity between the different local control units, the LCUs, or LCE for the Dutch speakers. For example: an inspector in one region barely looks at labelling, another one elsewhere analyses it in depth. A veterinarian sent into the chocolate industry in West Flanders interprets things differently than in East Flanders, and so on. How do you intend to reduce these inconsistencies, and how will you guarantee the same level of quality across all those regions, among all those inspectors?

Christine Romeyns

We could have put that on the list of challenges. That said, you have to know that in equal situations, the objective is for the outcome of an inspection to be equal. But in different situations the decision varies, and it is rare to have two perfectly identical situations. Even when situations appear identical, there is a prior track record, there is behaviour at the moment of the inspection, there are practical findings on the day of the inspection that can differ. And finally, our inspectors are not machines, they are not robots out in the field.

We are aware of that difficulty and we have put safeguards in place. Which safeguards? Continuous training, and within that training the need for exchange between the units, between the LCUs, in order to harmonise practices. That means an inspector spends a day accompanying a colleague from another LCU to see how that person works. That already happens.

We also have fairly strict procedures, with checklists based on the legislation, with yes or no answers, green light or red light. They are accessible on our website, which means that before an inspection people can go and look at which points will be checked at their premises. The problem is that it is red or green, it gives no shade of grey or orange. We are aware of that issue, we are thinking about it and we are working on it.

For inspectors there is also a charter to respect. In the FASFC charter there is something quite important, and I will quote only one point: "As an FASFC inspector, I support every operator in the food chain with respect and fairness."

But the idea, faced with this observation, because I cannot say that the entrepreneurs who tell you this are wrong, is that in 2026 we are going to develop a tool to help us with exactly that. We are going to develop artificial intelligence for inspections, in order to make those inspections faster, so that we spend less time on site when we carry out an inspection, and so that the inspection becomes even more uniform.

Alexander Platteeuw

I suggest we talk about it again in twelve months. I am inviting you back already.

Christine Romeyns

Gladly.

Alexander Platteeuw

Another question that comes from companies and that I ask myself as well concerns the frequency of certain inspections. There are quite a few companies that are already certified against BRC or IFS, or other private standards, because their customers, the supermarkets, require it. They have been used to those systems for years, and those supplying supermarkets in the United Kingdom face additional audits on top of that.

On the other side there is the village restaurant that tells me: I see an FASFC inspector once every three years. So there is quite a large difference between those two groups, especially when you read the 2023 Sciensano report, which stated that 72 % of foodborne outbreaks are linked to restaurants. How do you explain that difference in inspection frequency?

Christine Romeyns

It is not every three years, it is every four years. And there is a difference between companies with a validated self-checking system and other companies.

You also have to know that in the hospitality sector alone we have 65,000 SMEs in Belgium. Inspecting 25 % of them per year, so once every four years, already represents a very, very significant inspection workload.

The principle is clear: self-checking is the foundation. It is first and foremost the operator who guarantees hygiene, and a large part of the FASFC's work consists of verifying that self-checking. As for inspection frequencies, we regularly reassess the level of compliance and the level of risk against objective criteria. The level of risk also covers the number of people affected by the consumption of the product. At the corner chip shop, fewer people can be directly affected than in a processing plant. That is the reality of the field, that is the reality of the sector.

Let us be clear: as for our staff resources, I do not have much hope that they will grow. So we are going to concentrate our efforts where the impact on public health is greatest. And we are going to go further in the future: we will try even harder to find systems that better target operators in difficulty, not simply on the basis of a sector analysis, but at the level of the individual operators in difficulty, in order to make the process more efficient. The idea is to optimise targeting and inspection frequency not simply on the basis of sectors, but on the basis of operators and the knowledge we have of them, so that inspections become more uniform, more effective, better targeted and therefore faster.

Alexander Platteeuw

Speaking of the consumer: the number of complaints on food safety, of remarks or notifications from consumers, rose by 7 % in 2024 compared with the previous year. How do you explain that increase?

Christine Romeyns

Before explaining it, I want to say that I am pleased about it. I am glad, because it means that consumers trust the FASFC, that they approach us easily and that they share their complaints and their food-related concerns with us.

For us, complaints are important signals. They indicate a possible food safety risk, and they are a reason to go out into the field. So we treat them as a priority. To give you a few figures: 55 % of the complaints we receive

lead to action in the field within the month. And in those inspections, 50 % turn out to be justified, meaning that we find either the problem raised by the consumer or other problems. So having more complaints actually gives us a real indication for better targeting of operators.

And how do we explain it? We explain it because food safety is increasingly a genuinely live topic. People worry more and more about what is on their plate. Alongside this increase in complaints, we have an increase in product recalls, which should not frighten anyone either: it is because self-checking is getting better and better and because we are raising our level of food safety. But of course people see more product recalls, so they ask more questions.

You also have to look at the parallel increase in press enquiries. We went from 500 press enquiries in 2023 over a full year to, this year and the year is not over yet, close to 1,000 enquiries. So press enquiries have doubled. Our media presence obviously affects us in terms of visibility, and the ease with which people can contact the FASFC and receive an answer means that this input can reach us. For us, that is positive.

We also run quite a few surveys in order to move forward. We currently have a survey whose results we will have in the first quarter of 2026, looking at the overall visibility of the FASFC, at perception, and at the added value that operators and consumers believe the agency has. And then there are the television programmes: "Les pieds dans le plat" on the French-speaking side and the VRT recordings on the Dutch-speaking side, which show the work of the agency's inspectors. That means we have a closeness to the consumer that keeps growing, and so they come to us more and more.

Alexander Platteeuw

A question few companies dare to put to the FASFC, including some of my clients, so I will ask it on their behalf. When a serious food safety infringement is established, the FASFC first issues a warning, possibly followed by an official report. What are the subsequent steps?

Christine Romeyns

First of all, you should know that if the infringement is serious and poses an imminent danger to public health, there is no warning and no official report: there is a temporary closure of the establishment. To give you an idea, in 2024 we carried out nine closures of establishments per week. That is the first thing.

Then, if it goes further, we can move towards procedures to withdraw an authorisation or an approval if necessary. We do that as well. We try not to get there, because it is the end of a business, but if food safety is in doubt, we have to do it.

Then, when we come for the first time, we have an infringement matrix linked to the checklists we mentioned earlier. Depending on the percentage of infringements on that checklist, different measures are taken. First, we issue a warning, meaning that we set a deadline within which certain matters must be put in order, and we come back for a follow-up inspection. When we come back, we focus on the points that were not in order at the first inspection. Now, let us be clear: if we blatantly observe another problem during the follow-up inspection, we record that as well.

At that inspection there are two possibilities. Either the company has decided to put things in order and everything is fine. Or the company has taken measures to put things in order, because it is a structural problem for instance, and we see that it has taken the necessary steps but that it is not yet finalised: that is fine too. Or the company has done nothing, and in that case we move towards an official report of infringement, which we send to the public prosecutor. What can happen then? There can be administrative fines, administrative settlements, prosecution.

At that stage it is obviously a failure, because imposing sanctions will always be a failure: what we want is to bring an operator into compliance quickly. But there comes a moment when we have to conclude that a deadline was given to put things in order, that it was not met, that there is no willingness to do so, and that we have to impose sanctions.

In the future, the FASFC also really wants to distinguish between two things. Fraud, and on fraud there will be no discussion and no tolerance. And on the other hand errors through lack of knowledge, for which we want to use our information mission in order to help the company. For me that will be truly fundamental in the coming years: distinguishing fraud from error.

Alexander Platteeuw

This is now the second time you mention that you would rather help companies. Today an inspector arrives at a company and says: I am here to inspect, but I cannot advise you. So I see that you want to move in that direction. I am not talking about consultancy, but about a form of support.

Christine Romeyns

Indeed, an inspector's job is not a consultant's job, but that does not mean he is not allowed to advise. His role is always to explain what is not right and what is expected in order to be compliant. But it is not his role to find the means of getting there. Your objective is this; the means of achieving it is a matter for the consultant, not the inspector, because there are several ways of reaching an objective.

Our vision will clearly evolve, because we are in the process of establishing the agency's strategic vision for the future, and in that vision we want to go much further in providing support. The FASFC is going to develop the role of its outreach and support unit drastically, because that is how we will strengthen prevention and advice. Inspection is not the only way to guarantee food safety, far from it. There is also information, pedagogy, and support for operators to anticipate and to improve their practices. In that area, while carefully keeping to our federal competences, since we are not a regional body, we will work on training by multiplying the initiatives we can take in that field.

That is genuinely our strategy for the future: inspection and support. And that is what I told you at the start: we want co-creation, we want to be partners, not just enforcers. We will remain primarily an inspection body, because that is what we were created for. But the objective is to be firm where firmness is needed, and also present to help, to inform, to train and to prevent.

Alexander Platteeuw

You have already mentioned the Belgian self-checking system several times. It was created in the early 2000s and is often cited as a model unique in Europe. At the time, the FASFC took the view that private standards such as BRC and IFS did not offer sufficient food safety guarantees. Yet in the Netherlands the NVWA, let us say the Dutch FASFC, does accept BRC and IFS in companies. So I understand that the FASFC says no, we will keep this self-checking system and we will come and see whether the self-checking has been properly implemented. Is that correct?

Christine Romeyns

Yes, it is true that our self-checking system is entirely unique and that we have never wanted to fully introduce those private systems, because our system offers guarantees that the private standards do not fully provide. Our public authority has to account to Europe and to the population, and we do not want to rely blindly on private inspection.

That said, we are not entirely closed off, because in certain cases we already take those standards into account, whether BRC, IFS or others, under the 80/20 rule. If a company has 80 % of its activities covered by a guide

validated by the FASFC and the remaining 20 % certified against private standards, then the operator benefits from the advantages of validation, even though 100 % of its activities are not covered by the self-checking guide.

At present we are working at the level of the Heads of Agencies. We have working groups at European level, and at global level as well, but there we are working at European level between the heads of the different agencies, the NVWA, the FASFC and the others, and with our scientific committee, precisely on the integration of private systems, but at European level and not exclusively at Belgian level.

For us there is one condition: those standards must cover all legal requirements, not just some of them. We also have to be guaranteed access, as the FASFC, to all the conclusions of the private audits. We have to be able to verify their independence and how their system operates, so as to be sure that we end up with something that delivers the same quality. So it is not an opposition of principle, it is genuinely a desire to preserve the transparency and public accountability that rest with us. Our responsibility comes after that of the operators: the operator carries out its self-checking, and then the FASFC remains responsible for controlling the food chain at the general level, and it is we who have to step in when there is a problem. So it is important to us that self-checking covers all legal requirements.

Alexander Platteeuw

Something else: I have to congratulate you on what I saw during the month of November, the FHR, the Food Hygiene Rating, which the FASFC now publishes, meaning that inspection results at operators are visible to the general public. Personally I am very pleased. Is this FHR a first step towards deeper transparency in the food chain?

Christine Romeyns

Absolutely, Alexander, that is the objective, and we already have a next step, a next date that has been set: 30 June 2026. Under the European programme for the digitalisation of the administration, we are going to introduce a development that will make a set of data of potential interest to consumers, operators and journalists accessible. We are going to make the list of operators holding approvals and authorisations accessible, broken down by activity code, along with those that have received a smiley.

What will that change in terms of transparency? Those tables are already accessible as part of the administration's publications, but they are practically unreadable. From now on, an operator will genuinely be able to look up who it is contracting with, who it is working with, what approvals, authorisations and smiley that party holds, and for which activity codes. That is important for the whole chain.

Alexander Platteeuw

You lead an agency that is often in the media, whenever there is a crisis or a high-profile inspection. Looking to the future, what would you like people to say about your leadership at the head of the FASFC?

Christine Romeyns

Good question. I will answer in three points.

First an internal point. I want people to say of the agency that it is a good place to work and that everyone feels their job is meaningful. Because, as I told you earlier, I have always wanted to work for society, and meaning matters.

Second, I want the agency to be a genuine partner in the food chain. No longer simply the pebble in the shoe, but a genuine partner for the sectors and for the consumer.

And finally, I want us to remain an organisation that is ready to face crises. An organisation that can, whatever the unpredictability of the crisis that arrives, react instantly and be ready for the safety of the chain. If by the end

of my mandate I have achieved that, I will have fulfilled my mission.

Alexander Platteeuw

One last question. If you could work for a day in a food business, what would you choose? A slaughterhouse, a catering company, a local bakery, or rather an organic grocery? And why?

Christine Romeyns

Just one day. If I had to choose a single day, I would go to none of those, I would go to where it all begins, to experience the different realities of the food chain. I would go to a farm, where there would be a field, where there would be cows, where there would be processing into butter and sales to the consumer. I have the feeling that there I could really grasp in practical terms what the mission means, see the reality of the self-employed person behind it as well, and connect the soil to the plate, seeing how food safety is guaranteed in practice at every stage.

I do hope that on that day there will not be an inspection and that it will just be a day for learning. Are you giving me that for Christmas?

Alexander Platteeuw

I cannot promise that 100 %. Christine, thank you sincerely for accepting my invitation and for sharing your vision of how the FASFC works. I wish you every success in your role, and perhaps we will see each other again in twelve months, who knows, with even more news to share, I hope.

Christine Romeyns

Thank you for the invitation, Alexander. It has been a real pleasure.

Alexander Platteeuw

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