



## EMERGING RISKS AND THE ALLOCATION OF EFSA RESOURCES

Points for discussion at the EFSA Board meeting,

19-20 March 2003

### Introduction

The Board has discussed issues surrounding risk assessment, management and communication, in particular how EFSA might adopt a new and more open strategy towards risk assessment in order to be both successful and credible. However, a further key success factor in our risk assessment approach will be whether we make the right decision as to what should be assessed. Two issues arise from this:

- first the process by which EFSA identifies emerging issues and the role of the Board in that process;
- and second the conflict that might arise between ‘routine’ work and horizon scanning for emerging issues.

Concerns which have been raised with me as a Board member concerning nitrofurans in poultrymeat, outlined in the Annex to this paper. The issue is of particular concern to me as a consumer advocate and I look forward to hearing from the executive how they intend to handle it. However, the purpose of this paper is not to discuss the safety issues around poultrymeat, but to use it as a means of highlighting the critical need for the Board to consider how EFSA will identify and assess emerging food safety risks. An equally important emerging issue might be the whole subject of nutrition and the implications of increasing obesity for society.

The key test for EFSA will be how it handles the first major food crisis that it encounters. It will be this that determines whether the public across Europe has confidence in EFSA. The Authority could be doing excellent work on the widest range of food safety issues, but if it fails to foresee a major problem and if it is poorly prepared to deal with it, then the public will perceive EFSA as incompetent.

Furthermore such a crisis will be a particular test for the Board. We are the publicly appointed and publicly accountable element in the governance of EFSA. It will be we who are held responsible for failures to detect and to act.

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It is crucial therefore that we give some thought now as to how we will identify emerging risks, how we will be prepared to deal with those risks and what are the priorities for EFSA's work.

**How to identify emerging issues**

Article 34 of the Regulation gives EFSA the explicit responsibility for establishing monitoring procedures aimed at identifying emerging risks. This leads to a number of questions:

- What procedures does the Board need to put in place in order to ensure that those risks are identified and brought to the attention of EFSA?
- Who will raise issues and how? Clearly this must be a core duty of each of the four elements of EFSA – the Board, the Director and staff, the Advisory Forum, the Scientific Committees and Panels – but this is unlikely to be adequate on its own.

The question of poultrymeat is interesting because it has arisen from a number of sources: individual companies, representative organisations in the food chain, regulatory organisations and consumers. It demonstrates how in one country, the UK, the collective interests of the whole food chain can be harnessed towards providing relevant information. If EFSA provides appropriate and accessible channels, this should be a major source of information across the whole EU. The national food agencies also have a key role to play.

In addition to using members of the food chain and especially consumer organisations to flag up emerging issues, opinion surveys could be used to find out what consumers in general are concerned about. EFSA should also be open to concerns raised directly by members of the general public. However, it would be necessary to decide how much concrete evidence is needed from informants to back up their concerns.

More difficult to identify will be the 'orphan' issues, that is, the ones that no-one is interested in but which present a real danger to consumer health and safety.

**Board meeting procedures**

Apart from the procedures that the Board needs to put in place for capturing information, it would be useful to establish how issues raised by Board members should be handled at board meetings. As a Board member I am already being given information about specific food safety problems. But it is not clear what is the best procedure for bringing these to the attention of the Authority. Equally, it is important to be able to reassure our informants and the general public that their concerns have been reported and that action is being taken. One suggestion is that the Board might wish to have a regular item on the agenda for reporting and reviewing emerging issues.

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Given the importance of this issue, the Board may in addition wish to establish formal procedures for horizon scanning rather than just depending on vigilance in noting and reporting new issues. But if so, decisions will be required as to how much time and resource should be allocated to this work. Nor is pinpointing new risks sufficient in itself – time and resource must be set aside for assessing their dangers.

This presents a very considerable challenge in setting priorities for our work. There are a wide range of issues to cover and a very limited budget, even when the 50% cut is reinstated. Potentially controversial decisions will have to be taken as to which items of work are assigned a high priority and which a low priority. The criteria for those decisions will need to be clear and ‘owned’ by the whole Board.

**Routine work vs. horizon scanning**

Finally, there is the question of how the Board is able to set its own agenda and how far it is constrained by programmes set outside EFSA.

Much of the work being done now by the current scientific committees is likely to be re-allocated to the new Panels as was indicated in a paper that was received at one of the Board meetings last year. As the Board has become more informed about the work of EFSA and its own priorities, it may wish to look again at this issue.

A further issue of great importance is the very large amount of work already set for EFSA in existing or forthcoming EU legislation. The Commission is currently drafting new laws which will mean that EFSA will have to evaluate flavourings, food supplements, allergens, all food claims, and all GMOs. An existing law, for example, requires a risk assessment for each new additive, and there are already many other tasks of a routine nature which are allocated to EFSA

As a consequence, there must be considerable potential for the majority of EFSA’s time and resource to be diverted into routine validation issues which the Board may consider are not high priority matters for EFSA. At the very least, the Board will have to decide how much of EFSA’s budget should go to routine work and how these demands are controlled and channelled.

If a major part of EFSA’s time and resources is devoted to this kind of routine validation work, then what is the extra value the Authority is providing over and above the previous arrangements?

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**Summary of Questions**

1. How do we identify emerging risks
  - What procedures does the Board need to put in place
  - Who will raise issues and how
  - How does EFSA ensure that channels of communication are easily accessible
  - How much concrete evidence is required to back up concerns
  - How does EFSA identify ‘orphan’ issues
2. Board meetings
  - How should Board members alert EFSA to issues they are aware of
  - How should Board members feed back information
3. Priorities
  - How much resource should be devoted to procedures for horizon scanning
  - On what basis will emerging issues be identified as high or low priority
4. Routine vs horizon scanning
  - Should all the work of the current scientific committees continue
  - How does the Board approach routine validation work
  - How does the Board control and channel the demands made on it
5. How does EFSA provide added value over and above the previous system

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**ANNEX**

**Nitrofurans in poultrymeat**

Major concerns have been expressed to me about poultrymeat containing nitrofurans that is being exported to the EU from third countries. This matter has been raised with me by organisations right across the UK food chain and also by Phillip Whitehead MEP who has recently visited the FVO to discuss this matter, and who took part in the European Parliament's debate on this subject on 17 December 2002.

Nitrofurans, antibiotics used to prevent coccidiosis, have been banned for use in the EU since 1994 because they are genotoxic carcinogens, increasing the risk of cancer in humans if products containing them are consumed over a long period of time.

I understand that there have now been 35-40 EU Rapid Alerts on this issue. In the first five weeks of this year alone there were 11 notifications to the Rapid Alert system by six Member States (the UK, Germany, Spain, Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands), nine of these relating to imports from Brazil and two from Thailand.

I note too that the Portuguese authorities have recently found extensive evidence of the use of nitrofurans in their own poultry industry following routine testing, and that they are taking drastic action including slaughtering flocks and testing all poultry farms.

My information is that, despite the Rapid Alerts, there has been little progress in Brazil in preventing the use of nitrofurans and in instituting and carrying out rigorous testing regimes. In Thailand, by contrast, I am told that there has been a much more pro-active stance by the national authorities.

This matter is particularly worrying for UK as imports of poultrymeat have more than doubled in ten years. This is to meet a rising demand for a product which is recommended by experts as being more healthy than red meat. It is also to meet the big rise in demand for meals cooked outside the home. Most of the imported product goes into catering including school meals.