

AF 06.04.2004 – 9 - Minutes of the AF Working Group on Communications



European Food Safety Authority

Minutes

ADVISORY FORUM WORKING GROUP ON COMMUNICATIONS

24 February 2004

Diamant Centre, Brussels

Members of the Advisory Forum Working Group on Communications

Chair: Anne-Laure Gassin, Communications Director, EFSA

Present: Hubert Erhart, Austria
Pascal Houbaert, Belgium
Charlotte Bender, Denmark
Marja Pohjanpalo, Finland
Juliette Chevalier, France
Burckhard Viell, Germany
Georgia Grintzali, Greece
Dr Wayne Anderson, Ireland
Patrick Hau, Luxembourg
Irène Van Geest, The Netherlands
Luis Salino, Portugal

Observers: Kamila Fiedlerova, Czech Republic

European Food Safety Authority : Executive Director and Staff

Geoffrey Podger, EFSA	Dr Herman Koëter, EFSA
Dr Carola Sondermann, EFSA	Lucia de Luca, EFSA
Ingela Söderlund, EFSA	Thierry Beniflah, EFSA

Apologies: Dr Massimo Aquili, Italy
Dr Héctor Alonso Martin, Spain
Jerker Sörenson, Sweden
Neil Martinson, UK
Helen Kinghan, EFSA
Sylwia Osmak, Poland
Kristin Faerden, Norway
Andrea Jurcakova, Slovak republic
Beate Gminder, European Commission

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1. Introduction and Adoption of Agenda (Doc AF Comm WG 24.02.2004-1)

1.1 The meeting was opened by Ms. Anne-Laure Gassin, EFSA Director of Communications, and chairperson for the Working Group. She welcomed the members to the second meeting of the group and asked for comments on the draft agenda. The agenda was adopted without modification. The new members of the Working Group were introduced.

2. Minutes of the meeting 24 November 2003 and matters arising (Doc AF Comm WG 24.02.2004 – 2)

2.1 No further remarks from members. The minutes of the previous meeting were adopted and will be posted on the web.

3. Update by Geoffrey Podger, Executive Director, on progress at EFSA

3.1 Mr. Geoffrey Podger, Executive Director of EFSA, provided an update to the group on EFSA's activities beginning with an overview of EFSA's move to Parma. He began by stating that EFSA was pleased to have at last a permanent home and that the location of Parma would offer many advantages, for instance in terms of future recruitment. He stressed that it will be essential to guarantee the functionality of the Authority until the final move will take place, and that no move can start before solutions are found for issues such as the identification of a suitable building and infrastructure for EFSA, housing for staff and appropriate education facilities for the children of EFSA staff.

He added that urgent discussions on these matters are ongoing with authorities in Parma and in Rome. The result of such discussions should give EFSA an idea of the timeframe of the move, which could possibly start in summer 2004 and go until the summer 2005. The group was informed that the first EFSA Management Board meeting to take place in Parma will be held in April 2004.

3.2 Geoffrey Podger informed members of the European Parliament's approval of EFSA's budget of €29 m. This should allow the Authority to cope with its present workload.

3.3 In order to promote better communication between the Authority and stakeholders, after the conference organised in Ostend, Belgium, in October 2003, EFSA has pursued its policy of openness and public involvement in its work. The next Management Board Meeting will see for instance the participation of public as observers (the public has been able to view Management Board meetings from the outset through transmission on EFSA's website), which will be supported by a new and more user-friendly version of EFSA's website.

3.4 EFSA will plan further initiatives to involve stakeholders in risk assessment in the future. At least 3 stakeholder meetings should take place in 2004, with a consultation

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related to GMOs already planned in May. EFSA's Management Board agreed on the proposals submitted regarding stakeholder involvement in risk assessment, which will be reviewed in 12 months' time. These also include the suggested involvement of closely interested third parties in refining messages related to risk communication, in particular for sensitive issues and for risk assessments related to products already on the market (for example semicarbazide).

3.6 Finally, the Advisory Forum discussed at its meeting of 13 February in Dublin the issues of salmon and dioxin in fish and avian influenza. With regards to salmon and dioxins, Mr. Podger explained that EFSA's decision not to issue any official communications was due to the fact that the scientific findings related to this issue were not new and that the topic could best be handled by the national food safety authorities in Member States, particularly taking into account the nutritional aspects which properly vary between Member States. With regards to avian influenza, EFSA decided to issue an information update on 23 January taking into account the communications from DG SANCO related to the introduction of a new control measure. Following this, a statement from the Scientific Panel on Animal Health and Welfare from its plenary meeting of 29-30th January was also published as an Annex to the minutes.

3.7 The Advisory Forum agreed that the information exchange between members on both of these issues proved to be very useful and effective. The Forum also agreed that in dealing with such issues in the future, the Authority would send to the Advisory Forum an early indication of what is going on from a scientific point of view as well as what EFSA intended to do in terms of communications in the case of a real or perceived risk. Mr. Podger invited the members of the Advisory Forum Communications Working Group to further discuss communications on such issues in the afternoon session. Ms Gassin confirmed that the point would be tabled in the afternoon following an exchange between members regarding recent communications on the above mentioned issues.

3.8 In response to further queries from members regarding the organisation of public meetings, Geoffrey Podger provided further explanation as follows. He indicated that the meetings of the Management Board have allowed public access from the outset through webstreaming. Members of the public wishing to participate in person at future meetings would be invited to do so as observers. With regards to public involvement in risk assessment, EFSA intends to facilitate input in advance of the risk assessment process; however, deliberations of Scientific Panels regarding future opinions could not be made open to the public and of course the opinions themselves were in no way negotiable.

3.12 Similarly, Mr. Podger informed that Member States are given the opportunity to provide input to risk assessments and that in the future, information exchange could be further facilitated through appropriate IT systems, including also the possibility of teleconferencing.

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4. Update by Herman Koëter, Deputy Executive Director on progress at the Science Department

4.1 Mr. Herman Koëter, Deputy Executive Director, presented the EFSA's 2004 Science Work Programme (*see meeting documents - Annex 4*). Mr. Koëter began by stressing the importance of a close collaboration between science and communications in order to raise awareness about scientific findings and publication of opinions.

4.2 Mr. Koëter pointed out some specific projects and initiatives of the Science Department referring to the 2004 Work Programme and to a subsequent document submitted to the Advisory Forum entitled "Investing in Food Science."

4.3 He indicated that the Science Programme of the Authority could be articulated around 5 major themes as follows:

a) Provide scientific opinions and guidance/advice in response to questions related to food safety issues formally addressed to the Authority by the European Commission, the European Parliament, the Member States or by the Authority itself (through self-tasking)

b) Assess the risks of and, as appropriate, propose risk-related factors for specific groups of regulated substances, following legally defined notification procedures and time schedules (eg food and feed additives, GMO applications, pesticides etc...)

c) Monitor specific risk factors and diseases and provide scientific opinions on tests and other tools to control these risk factors and diseases (eg geographical BSE risk assessment, monitoring of zoonoses and other food-borne zoonotic agents etc...)

d) Carry out preparatory work for the possible future evaluation of health claims for foodstuffs (recognising that the specific tasks and workload cannot be anticipated at this stage given ongoing discussions in the European Parliament and Council on the legislative proposal on nutrition and health claims)

e) Apply and promote new and harmonised scientific approaches and methodologies for hazard and risk assessment of food and feed.

4.4. In carrying out its work, the Authority will also strive to establish appropriate contacts and networks with scientific experts and research institutes. For instance EFSA is currently in contact with DG Research in order to establish discussions on the 7th Framework Programme and identify areas in which close collaboration could be envisaged.

4.5 Herman Koëter's presentation of the scientific work programme was followed by a question and answer session. Key points raised included:

- With regards to questions concerning the establishment of scientific networks, Herman Koëter confirmed that the Authority's intent was to utilise and build on existing networks and to facilitate information exchange and co-ordination of efforts on issues related to food and feed safety.

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- Members suggested that the names of scientists included in the expert panels at national level could be forwarded to the Authority.
- A question was raised regarding the procedure followed in the communication of scientific opinion, and specifically whether a specific timeframe had been defined between the finalisation and the publication of scientific opinions adopted by EFSA Panels. Herman Koëter specified that while a standard operating procedure had not been finalised yet, a Register of Requested Opinions would shortly be published on the EFSA website including the list of all questions addressed by the Scientific Panels and the requested deadlines. After the adoption of scientific opinions, publication of opinions was done in a timely manner following information and consultation of the Advisory Forum as required. Mrs. Gassin, provided further explanation regarding the procedures followed by her department in the development of risk communications, particularly for opinions concerning sensitive issues of high public interest. Members agreed to send to the Authority examples of such standard operating procedures regarding publication and communications of scientific opinions where they exist at national level. Anne-Laure Gassin will also forward to members a copy of the media handling guidelines agreed with EFSA's Scientific Committee regarding the handling of media queries relative to EFSA scientific opinions.

5. Introduction of Thierry Beniflah, Head of IT

5.1 Mr. Thierry Beniflah, Head of IT, gave a presentation about the mission of the IT Working Group (see attached), and went on to explain the importance of understanding customer needs in order to better identify system requirements. In order to be able to share documents and information between EFSA and the Member States, tools as well as agreements for the sharing of data are necessary. Thierry Beniflah shared with the group ideas for future projects, including the establishment of a password protected Extranet that will be further discussed with the Advisory Forum's IT working group which will hold its first meeting in April. He asked the group for their feedback and inquired as to the most efficient way of channelling input from the Communications to the IT working group.

5.2 Pascal Houbaert presented to the group some initial ideas gathered by a specific task force of the Communications working group, charged with identifying communications requirements for the future IT working group. These requirements included the development of such an Extranet not only for the posting of information and documentation concerning issues of common interest but also the possibility of having threaded discussions on evolving issues. Such an IT facilitated discussion forum could allow members to be updated on emerging issues. The Authority would be expected to play an important role in acting as "an intelligent clearing house," organising and making available in an efficient way information concerning topics and issues of interest to all Advisory Forum members. He also stressed the importance of having efficient search engines on EFSA's website and possible future extranet, capable of searching in more than one language, the feasibility of which was confirmed by Thierry Beniflah.

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5.3 Following a question regarding the advantage of a closed Extranet with respect to the present situation, Mr. Beniflah explained that the future system would facilitate information exchange and add the possibility of tracking such exchanges and providing opportunity to comment. It would be a multidimensional tool, allowing to add points to the discussion, sort information by topics, date, author and so on. Members added that the past experience with discussions on the salmon and dioxin issue could have been facilitated by such an extranet. In addition, Mrs. Ingela Soderlund stated that the new system will not only be for the benefit of the Communication Working Group but also for other departments or for documents sharing with Member States.

5.4 The members pointed out some important requirements for the platform including points such as:

- Extranet function of the system and accessibility of the Member States
- Posting of Press Releases with extra background information but strictly protected, and links to the communications departments of the national food agencies.
- Possibility to keep track of daily national press monitoring etc..

5.5 Further discussions took place regarding the meaning of the term “intelligent clearing house” identified in the task force’s requirements document. The example of such a clearing house set up by WHO to manage scientific discussions operated via a moderator was proposed. Other members suggested however that while such a development could be considered by the scientific departments of national food safety authorities and EFSA, this was not an immediate need of the Communications working group as such. AL Gassin invited members to consider also that in order to be effective, the creation of an extranet would have implications in terms of human resources not only for EFSA but also Member States, as collaboration and input would be required in order to develop an effective site.

5.6 Mr. Beniflah took note of the suggestions and briefly outlined a system which could carry out the functions requested. AL Gassin suggested to draft a specifications document that will be circulated to the members of the group for input and validation. This will provide the basis for contribution to the next meeting of the IT Working Group to be held in April.

6. Information and communications exchange

6.1. AL Gassin introduced this agenda item indicating that the purpose was to exchange views on the topics concerned and provide an update on actions taken by members including public perception in the various countries. Furthermore the Authority would like to assess whether members found the information exchange on both the salmon and dioxin and avian influenza issues useful, how this could be improved, and finally whether EFSA had fully met the group’s expectations in this context.

6.2. Introducing the issue on salmon, Mrs. Gassin reiterated the explanation provided by Geoffrey Podger regarding the stance taken by EFSA on this topic, and more

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specifically the decision taken not to communicate on this topic, as the scientific findings were not new and public advice regarding implications of the findings if any, could best be given at national level.

6.3. Overall, members were satisfied with the early exchange of information facilitated by EFSA on this issue. Such an exchange allowed members to quickly see what positions were being taken by other national authorities and therefore facilitate consistent communications. Some members however indicated that EFSA could have provided further help to members by providing more advanced warning regarding the upcoming publication of the study on farmed salmon and dioxins in *Science*. While the majority were satisfied with the decision taken by EFSA not to communicate on this issue, some members indicated that such communication could have played a role in helping to rebuild consumer trust in food safety (quoting the role of EFSA as expressed in the White Paper on Food Safety.) This could also have provided an opportunity for EFSA to make itself better known to the European public, perhaps by selecting a specific point on which EFSA could have provided clarification (eg methodological aspects of risk assessment). Most members agreed that the requirement for EFSA communications would have been different had the subject evolved to an actual food scare.

6.5 Members also provided information regarding national developments on this topic. Marja Pohjanpalo indicated that this was a very important topic in Finland given the high level of fish and salmon consumption in this country. She indicated that a new study would be published in the coming weeks on this issue in Finland and would no doubt lead to new dietary recommendations. She indicated that she would keep the group informed on this issue. The topic was also an issue of high media interest in Ireland and France. AFSSA published a press release a few days following publication of the study in *Science* providing further information regarding methodological aspects.

6.6 On the subject of avian influenza, Al Gassin explained that EFSA decided to issue an information update in light also of the European Commission's own communications regarding the introduction of new control measures. She then sought the views of members on these subjects.

6.7. Members shared their experience in dealing with this issue in their respective countries. As for dioxins, members were satisfied with the role played by EFSA in facilitating information exchange. However, some would have liked EFSA to play a more important role in co-ordinating the information flow and scientific updates on this topic, particularly given the important number of scientific and public health authorities providing advice on this matter. Some also regretted the lack of clarity of the press release issued by the European Commission and suggested that additional communications from EFSA indicating that there was no food safety issue per se could have been helpful. It was also suggested that it could be quite useful to analyse retrospectively why the issue was more important in some markets than others (in other words, the factors influencing uptake by media of the topic and manner of conveying to the general public).

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6.8 AL Gassin summarized the discussion on the subject with some action points:

- As discussed and agreed at the meeting of the Advisory Forum of 13 February, EFSA will strive to provide early warning to members on scientific issues related to food safety. The Authority will also inform members of its own scientific assessment regarding such issues as well as its intent with regards to risk communication.
- It was also agreed that the subject of salmon and dioxins, and analysis of communications/media response to this issue could be tabled at a future meeting of the Communications Working Group.

7. Communications: forward planning

7.1 Mrs. Carola Sondermann, EFSA's Senior Press Officer, presented an overview of the upcoming scientific opinions to be published on the EFSA website as well as the communications initiatives planned (see attached). AL Gassin also encouraged members to keep the group updated regarding issues arising and upcoming opinions expected to be published in their respective countries.

7.2 The group then went on to discuss possible areas for future collaboration. It was decided that semicarbazide could be selected as a topic for presenting and discussing key learnings in the area of risk communications. With regards to more proactive work in the area of message development, the group decided that the topic of dioxins could be a good candidate for such collaboration. AL Gassin agreed to circulate a draft working plan to address this area, following suggestions of members that information be collected from countries as to the type of actions undertaken and messages communicated regarding the dioxin issue.

7.3 It was suggested that avian influenza might also be a topic for mutual collaboration. However, as this issue is broader than food safety per se, it was suggested that this topic might be better addressed in a more comprehensive way. AL Gassin suggested that this might be a possible topic for future crisis management scenarios under discussion in the Advisory Forum.

7.4 Mrs. Gassin announced that the new website to be launched in March, should indicate the links to the national authorities. She will therefore circulate an e-mail to collect the missing links, hoping to receive answers as soon as possible if not by the first of March.

8. Overview of the responsibilities of national agencies and food administrations relative to food safety

8.1 With regards to the document summarising the responsibilities of national agencies and food administrations related to food safety provided at the request of members, it was suggested by Greece that additional information could be made available regarding the respective budgets and organisation of the authorities. Other members felt however that it would be difficult to do so as the national authorities did not have the

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same remit. AL Gassin indicated that for such work to be undertaken, members would need to provide further information regarding staffing, organisation, budgets etc... to the Authority.

9. Any other business

9.1 With regards to future meetings, members suggested that it could be quite interesting to invite guest speakers to address specific topics related to risk communications. AL Gassin indicated that this could certainly be taken into account and invited members to identify possible speakers.

9.2. The next meetings of the Advisory Forum Working Group on Communications will be on 22 April (Brussels), 15 June (Parma) and 7 October (Brussels).

The Chair closed the meeting by thanking members for their contributions as well as the EFSA team for organisation of the meeting.