

STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATIVE PLATFORM
29-30 JUNE 2011
BREAK-OUT SESSIONS – RISK COMMUNICATIONS

This document summarises the discussions with the Stakeholder Consultative Platform regarding risk communications. The objectives of this session were to foster exchange, input and feedback from Platform members focusing on challenges and opportunities faced by both EFSA and stakeholders in risk communications.

The following outcomes and considerations can provide important guidance for EFSA in further developing its co-operation with stakeholders in risk communications.

- Risk perception:
 - Pesticides remain one of the top concern of consumers despite risk management measures and communications on residues in foods
 - Public health risk from zoonoses not generally perceived as such by consumers
 - Importance of managing crisis communications carefully to avoid lack of consumer confidence in products concerned (eg recent *E.coli* outbreaks)
- Risk benefit approaches:
 - EFSA's communications is not there to "white wash" (eg promote the safety of regulated substances such as food additives, pesticides etc...); each actor has its role to play
 - Some stakeholders would like EFSA to play a stronger role in this area (eg on health claims, EFSA could speak out more regarding the significance of the diet/health relationship -- is the claim useful or not?)
 - Are there elements of the story which are missing and how can the public better understand the whole story (are there opportunities to better co-ordinate communications between different actors?)
- Need for more targeted communications approaches
 - EFSA can tailor more its communications to different end users (eg reaching out to farmers and food operators regarding zoonoses)
 - Briefing meetings with stakeholders on key issues (eg cloning) are useful and appreciated
- Need for clearer messages and communications
 - EFSA language (both science and communications outputs) is still very technical; can simplify and better contextualise information
 - Risk assessment findings can form the basis of more general advice (eg EFSA's FAQ on chemicals in food)
 - Harmonisation of terminology is key, particularly in a global context
 - Language is a barrier; multi-lingual communications is important
- Strengthen co-operation with other key actors
 - Stakeholder organisations have important role to play in helping to spread the message to their members and different end users of the information
 - Need to work closely with Member States as public authorities and stakeholders can adapt communications to different national situations

- EFSA can capitalise on others' initiatives in order to increase outreach and effectiveness (eg communicating on use of antimicrobials in animals in context of Antibiotic Awareness Day)
- EFSA's interaction with stakeholders
 - Stakeholders would prefer longer pre-notification periods particularly on complex issues (eg health claims)
 - Applicants should have the opportunity to explain their submissions, opportunity for greater dialogue with EFSA.

Members of the Platform also gave specific feedback on the session itself as follows:

- Consider having a facilitator/moderator for the break-out groups
- Send a list of pre-determined questions to the Platform, with sufficient lead time so that organisations can seek input from their own members
- Greater involvement of participants by precirculating ahead of meetings the presentations to be given and other related material
- Useful to have had different perspectives presented (eg industry and NGO in same session)
- Members would appreciate making it possible for observers to also participate in the break-out sessions
- Organising special working groups could be a way of involving those who have no official status in the Platform.

The following section provides more detail on the discussions relating to each of the break-out groups: zoonoses, pesticides and health claims.

ZOONOSSES (C. Haga):

At the zoonoses breakout session presentations were given by Annette Toft of Copa-Cogeca, Robert Fitzhenry of EUFIC and Caroline Haga from EFSA Communications. Also present in the breakout group were Marjana Peterman of BEUC, Eliassen Mogens of EFFAT, Stephane Vidry of ILSI, Sebastian Kruse of Freshfel Europe as well as the observer Christophe Derrin of Copa-Cogeca in support of Annette Toft. Frank Boelaert of the Biological Monitoring Unit also participated in the discussions.

EFSA presented a general overview of its communications activities on zoonoses, the challenges and opportunities in this area and the way the Authority aims to improve its communications by implementing a more thematic approach. EFSA highlighted the challenges in communicating about this lesser known public health threat and the successes already achieved in this area, emphasising the need for cooperation with all actors.

Annette Toft's presentation focused on the importance of the subject for farmers and how Copa-Cogeca relies on EFSA's scientific advice in this area, stressing the need for EFSA to have credibility and a strong global standing. She gave examples on where EFSA's communications have had a strong impact on their sector and how the Authority's activities could be improved including targeting messages to a wider audience and providing more practical information both in scientific outputs and communications material.

Robert Fitzhenry talked about EUFIC's communications activities and how they use EFSA's outputs to create easily understood summaries and other materials. He also identified general challenges for communicating on zoonoses, such as maintaining trust in food safety from farm to fork and translating messages from technical reports to be understood by a wide variety of audiences.

After the presentations, began the group discussion on communications which participants found valuable. Most of the participants in the discussion started off by noting the value of EFSA's communications work. They generally find EFSA's communications material very useful for their own communications activities with their members and for creating FAQs and other material on zoonoses.

Participants discussed in general the importance of communicating about biological hazards, but also the difficulties as there is a need to communicate to a wide variety of audiences and that in crisis situations (such as the ongoing *E. coli* outbreaks) communications can have a major impact on consumer trust in the food chain. There may also be a need for relevant actors to focus on improving the 'image' of vegetables after the recent outbreak.

The group discussed among others: the possibility of targeting communications on zoonoses to different countries/geographical areas as the importance of for instance *Salmonella* varies between the countries; the trade implications which the advice may have; the need for consistent use of terminology in line with global standards; and the need to have communications material in further languages. One of the participants expressed the need for EFSA to more clearly identify its target audiences and not to try to communicate to everyone everywhere. In general, EFSA's plans for the thematic approach and attempts to contextualise the area seemed well received.

Stakeholders expressed a wish to receive EFSA communications outputs a day in advance in order to prepare communications to their members and to have a specific scientific contact person on zoonoses from EFSA (especially in crisis situations as outbreaks such as *E. coli* can occur). The group also discussed the length and difficulty of EFSA's reports and how the summaries could be more useful; for example by providing direct links from the summary to the corresponding section in the report itself.

PESTICIDES (S. Pagani):

Kalila Hajjat of ECPA gave a presentation as did Steve Pagani of EFSA Communications. Also present in the breakout group were Camilla Udsen of BEUC, Alexander Doering of FEFAC, and Thorsten Guthke of FEFANA, Bernd Gruner of CELCAA and Andreas Varlamos from BEUC. Herman Fontier, Head of the Pesticides Unit, also contributed to the group's discussions.

As a pilot project, all involved agreed that it was a useful exercise with lots of contributions to the extent that there seemed not to be enough time to cover all points.

Steve Pagani gave a general outline of EFSA communications on pesticides and also highlighted the challenges and opportunities the Authority faces such as the need to: convey better EFSA's work on pesticides and its ultimate aim to protect consumers; explain difficult concepts such as MRLs; and also address charges of not carrying out work in certain areas such as on so-called 'cocktail effects' and charges of industry bias.

Kalila Hajjat's presentation highlighted the existing challenges and difficulties around communication on Pesticides and then further focused on the ECPA's and Food Chain Roundtable communications approach on risk-benefit, aiming to issue clear understandable messages based on science, building on official press releases/web news stories from EFSA and/or DG Sanco, sharing communications both internally and with external stakeholders and collaboration with other stakeholders.

She underlined how ECPA used EFSA's annual pesticides residue report in the production of their own Q&A document on plant protection products and press release. She also emphasised the approach of the Food Chain Roundtable and the need to promote risk and benefits of modern technologies and their contribution to food quality and safety taken up in communication from EFSA and EC Commission.

The group discussed the possibility of tailoring messages for different groups – farmers, operators, sellers, consumers; the risk/benefit debate of pesticides, putting communications on pesticides into context – the bigger picture--, involving stakeholders in communications earlier and the importance and usefulness of information/fact sheets—not just press releases/web news stories.

When discussing how stakeholders could be more involved in EFSA's communication, Camilla Udsen made clear that BEUC would not support communications about the benefits of pesticides, other than the need for them to be used less. She agreed however with EFSA's approach which was to explain the role and work of EFSA and how this contributed ultimately to consumer protection.

Stakeholders believe there is a need for a longer period of pre-notification ahead of publication to give them more time to prepare their own communications when appropriate. Stakeholders also highlighted the need for continuous discussion on this topic involving the relevant stakeholders including consumers.

HEALTH CLAIMS (L. de Luca):

Presentations were given by: Beatte Kettlitz of FoodDrinkEurope, Henry Uitslag of BEUC and Lucia de Luca of EFSA Communications. The participation of Heng Leng, scientific officer in the Nutrition Unit, was useful to further clarify points related to EFSA's scientific work in this area. While Beatte Kettlitz's presentation focussed on the challenges faced by the organisation and its members in this area and the short pre-notification deadlines, BEUC's presentation was very general and talked about their communication on this subject to Dutch consumers.

All involved agreed that it was a useful exercise and had many questions regarding EFSA's work and communications activities. However, it proved to be difficult to dissociate communications from science and on several occasions, the discussions focussed on the science behind the claims which was not the scope of the exercise.

Participants were very understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by EFSA such as the criticisms from industry regarding EFSA's approach to substantiation of claims (eg clinical criteria, phased approach for assessment). Participants agreed that playing out of stakeholder criticisms in the media, rather than addressing these head on with the parties concerned (ie regulators, members of stakeholder associations..) was not necessarily the most appropriate approach.

The group discussed the use of pre-notification and how EFSA could have worked more with EU consumer groups, for example. The group acknowledged EFSA's efforts in improving its communications but would welcome clearer links in our communications with risk managers' actions (in relation to EFSA's opinions).

The value of publishing EFSA's work in scientific publications was discussed, and participants agreed that this could help EFSA in clarifying its work to a wider community (many stakeholders rely on the information disseminated by scientific publications).

Participants would have appreciated an easier way to retrieve the published claims belonging to the different batches on the EFSA website.