

Legal and Policy Affairs Unit

EFSA Pre-Accession Programme 2008

HANDLING FOOD CRISES: TASKS AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE RISK ASSESSOR

Skopje, 27/28 May 2008

Objective of the seminar

This seminar included presentation of the EFSA crisis handling plan and how to manage communication in a crisis. In addition to this speeches by experts from the Member States on specific crises and how they had been handled were given. Break out group work on a study case on a food crisis was performed.

Audience

There were 27 participants from the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Different authorities were represented in the seminar as follows:

- Ministry of Health - Food Directorate; Risk Analysis Department, Risk Assessment Unit, Unit for Risk Communication and Risk Information, Department for Food Standards, Unit for Food Safety Monitoring Programme, Inspection Department, Inspection Control Unit - Skopje, Inspection Control Unit - Strumica, Inspection Control Unit - Bitola, Inspection Control Unit - Tetovo,
- Ministry of Agriculture Forestry and Water Economy - Veterinary Directorate; Unit for safety of food of animal origin, Inspection Unit, Skopje, Sector for Veterinary Public Health, By - products of animal origin Unit, State Agricultural Inspection - Unit for fishery and agricultural policy,
- Crisis Management Centre-Government of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia- Department for Analyses, Assessment and Strategic Planning,
- Faculty of Veterinary Medicine - Food Institute,
- Republic Institute for Health Protection - Sector on Hygiene and Human Environment Protection

Interpretation

A simultaneous interpretation (to/from English and Macedonian) was provided.

General considerations

The seminar started with a welcome speech by *Prof. Stanislava Lazarevska*, Director of the Food Directorate, Ministry of Health, National Coordinator of the EFSA Pre-Accession Programme for the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Prof. Lazarevska opened the meeting thanking the participants for their attendance and EFSA for organizing this seminar. She shared her view on the present situation in her country with regards to the topic of this seminar and highlighted that representatives from Macedonian competent authorities appreciate the opportunity to participate in the EFSA Pre-Accession Programme. A programme like this is more than welcomed by all institutions holding a stake in the food safety system in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia especially in period when negotiation activities for accession to the EU are due to start.

The programme continued with welcome and introduction to EFSA by *Finn Sheye*, Pre-Accession Programme Coordinator, Policy Officer in the Legal and Policy Affairs Unit. In his speech he reminded that the aim of this programme is to enable competent authorities in beneficiary countries to better understand the basic elements of the EU food safety system and gain insight into the work of EFSA in order to integrate efficiently into its activities post-accession.

As this programme gave special consideration to food crisis handling the next presentation delivered by *Jon Bell*, Jon Bell Associates Ltd, an independent consultant from United Kingdom was on how to define a crisis. The speaker shared his views on what makes crisis, how incidents can be prevented, which control measures to apply and, in general how to prepare for a crisis. The presentation was followed by questions from the audience and a lively discussion. The representatives from the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia competent institutions asked details about crisis handling procedures, how to manage the food crisis as an act of terrorism, as well as how to cooperate with the media.

In continuation of the programme the next speaker, *Goran Kumrić*, Policy Officer, Legal and Policy Affairs Unit at EFSA, delivered the presentation on how EFSA is organised and prepared for a food crisis. He presented how EFSA is cooperating with the EU institutions and Member States as well as internal procedures in case of food crisis. Based on the Founding Regulation EFSA developed internal crisis handling manual which was tested during an internal food crisis exercise in February.

The next presentation was on managing communication in crises by *Karen Talbot*, Communications Advisor in the Communications directorate executive office, EFSA. Karen explained how the crisis communication should be done on an example of the contamination of food products with the chemical Sudan 1 which happened in the UK. She also informed on EFSA's cooperation with the MS on the communication issues through the Advisory Forum Communication WG where representatives from Candidate Countries regularly participate as observers.

The presentation on how to tackle crises at national level was delivered by *Geert De Poorter*, Director-general, Department Laboratories, Belgian Federal Agency for the

safety of the Food Chain. He presented the food crisis management policy in Belgium and stressed the importance and impact of a food crisis with an example on the Dioxin crisis. The Belgian Food Agency is responsible for control in the whole food chain. He stressed the role of crisis communication and the IT support as essential in controlling crisis. The speaker used many practical examples to explain how the crisis should be handled and concluded with stating that only a flexible crisis structure and collaborators that can handle both animal health and food crisis can be effective when needed.

The second day of the seminar started with a specific case study on dioxins incident in gelatins by *Geert De Poorter*. He explained what the dioxins and PCB (Polychlorinated Chemical Compounds) are, their sources and the main entry into the food chain. He concluded that the Belgian Food Agency in this case followed a well designed crisis structure, reacted very rapidly and managed the accident. The speech was followed by a question from the audience on how to determine if the crisis was handled in a proper way and when to declare that crisis has finished. In the discussion the speaker stated that public confidence in competent authorities is shaken for years after the crisis is solved.

The programme continued with an introduction to a Crises Exercise by *Jon Bell*, Jon Bell Associates Ltd, United Kingdom. The objective of this exercise was to work through a potential crisis situation and identify the level and nature of action required from the different institutions and agencies at national and European level. Aim of the discussions at every of four stages of the exercise was to have an exchange of views on the roles and responsibilities of the National Food Authorities, EFSA and the Commission once a problem as presented would occur. In addition to the question on: 'who should do what', and 'what can I expect from other institutes' the exercise addressed the issue on how to communicate the incident and the steps taken to inform the outside world.

Conclusions:

All the participants were very active in asking questions and in the discussions. During the group work participants were divided into two groups and each group appointed a chairman and a rapporteur. It was a very nice opportunity for representatives coming from different institutions to work together and exchange views and experiences facilitated by the crisis coordinator Mr. Bell. In the final discussions the appointed rapporteurs presented the summary of the group work. There was a very high interest among the participants in learning more about crises handling in EFSA and the Member States. The speakers explained the procedures on handling crisis by using many practical examples what was especially welcomed by the audience.