Draft Minutes

ADVISORY FORUM WORKING GROUP ON COMMUNICATIONS

15 June 2004

Starhotel Du Parc, Parma, Italy

Members of the Advisory Forum Working Group on Communications

Chair: Anne-Laure Gassin, Communications Director, EFSA

Present: Oskar Wawschinek, Austria
          Pascal Houbaert, Belgium
          Charlotte Bender, Denmark
          Marie-Paule Benassi, European Commission
          Marja Pohjanpalo, Finland
          Juliette Chevalier, France
          Burckhard Viell, Germany
          Edel Conway, Ireland
          Massimo Aquili, Italy
          Irene Van Geest, The Netherlands
          Knut Albert Solem, Norway
          Andrea Jurcakova, Slovak Republic
          Neil Martinson, UK

European Food Safety Authority : Executive Director and Staff

Geoffrey Podger, EFSA          Helen Kinghan, EFSA
Carola Sondermann, EFSA      Lucia de Luca, EFSA
Gwenaëlle Quivy            Thierry Beniflah, EFSA
Jan Bloemendal, EFSA        Filomena Siravo, EFSA

Invited Expert: Helga Odden Reksnes,
Director of Communication, National Veterinary Institute, Norway

Apologies: Kamila Fiedlerova, Czech Republic
          Beate Gminder, European Commission
          Georgia Grintzali, Greece
          Wayne Anderson, Ireland
1. Introduction and Adoption of Agenda (Doc AF Comm WG 15.06.2004-1)

1.1 The meeting was opened by Anne-Laure Gassin, EFSA Director of Communications. Anne-Laure Gassin welcomed members to the fourth meeting of the group held in Parma, the Authority’s future home. She welcomed in particular, the first guest speaker invited to the Working Group, Helga Odden Reksnes (Director of Communications, National Veterinary Institute) who under point n°5 of the agenda would update the group on risk communications associated with the HEATOX project.

1.2. Anne-Laure Gassin asked for comments on the draft agenda. Irene van Geest (NL) asked to provide an update on the research on risk communications on SEM to be carried out by one of her students. It was agreed that this agenda item would be taken right before lunch given Irene’s scheduled departure time. Burckhard Viell (Germany) requested that the Advisory Forum event to be held in Berlin be discussed under point 4. Following these amendments, the agenda was adopted.

2. Minutes of the meeting 22 April 2004 and matters arising (Doc AF Comm WG 15.06.2004 – 2)

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

3. Update by Geoffrey Podger, Executive Director, on progress at EFSA and key points arising from the Advisory Forum meeting (8.06.04).

3.1 Geoffrey Podger, Executive Director of EFSA, updated the group on EFSA’s future move to Parma. He underlined the fact that a contract for lease of a temporary building to accommodate EFSA staff should be signed in the next few weeks and that the move could start in October, right after the completion of the works to be carried out in the buildings concerned. Geoffrey Podger also informed that in order not to jeopardise EFSA’s work, the move shall take place gradually from the fall of 2004 and be completed by autumn 2005.

3.2. Geoffrey Podger also informed the group of the discussions at the last Advisory Forum meeting which took place in Budapest on 8 June. The subjects discussed included:

- The implementation of an extranet to support communications among the Advisory Forum which will be further discussed later in the day;
• A report providing preliminary feedback on EFSA’s image and performance following interviews carried out with interested parties and stakeholders by an external consultant (Paeps report) and now available on the EFSA’s website. The members were invited to submit any comments they might have;
• New member states, which have participated in the work of the Advisory Forum since its creation, were invited to let the Authority know if there was anything that could be done to facilitate their participation, including formal invitation to participate in the Advisory Forum working groups;
• The different views of the European Commission and of EFSA on methylmercury in fish were discussed with the view of learning from this experience for the future.

3.3. Geoffrey Podger also commented on some public events and visits. Two of EFSA’s scientific panels had held public stakeholder consultations in May. At an open session in the context of its meeting in May in Barcelona, the FEEDAP Panel had invited stakeholders to express their views with regards to the implementation of the Regulation on animal feed additives and the role of EFSA therein. The GMO Panel had also organised a consultation in May concerning its guidance document on the risk assessment of genetically modified plants and derived food and feed. Building on the learning and success of these events, further public consultations would take place in the future. Geoffrey Podger also announced the organisation of EFSA’s 1st Scientific Colloquium to be held on 28-29 June regarding methodologies and principles for setting tolerable intake levels for dioxins, furans and dioxin-like PCBs. Finally Geoffrey Podger informed the group of the visit of a delegation of the U.S. FDA to EFSA. The visitors were impressed by EFSA’s wish to establish strong links and exchange on risk assessment, especially in perspective of any possible food scares.

3.4. The members further discussed risk communications on methylmercury and more generally the need for collaboration between the Authority, the Member States and the European Commission in order to disseminate messages which are science-based and accurate, consistent and coherent. G. Podger stressed that public communications of risk assessment is not a purely scientific exercise and that the development of meaningful communications requires a more sociological approach, taking into account consumer needs and interests. Anne-Laure Gassin further stated that this was why EFSA’s advice on methylmercury in fish had pointed to the role of Member States in developing more specific dietary messages and advice for the population groups concerned, taking into account consumption patterns and attitudes to diet in each country. Marie-Paule Benassi of the European Commission explained that DG SANCO had sought in its own communication to provide more specific dietary advice, following the risk assessment issued by EFSA on methylmercury in fish, and to work with its own network in ensuring further dissemination of this advice. Geoffrey Podger also stressed the importance of dialogue and collaboration between risk assessors and risk managers, and as agreed at the previous meeting of the Advisory Forum, that EFSA should be invited to meetings held between the Commission and Member states where topics relevant to EFSA’s risk assessments are considered. Finally, he indicated that the Authority and the European
Commission acknowledged the importance of continuing to improve co-ordination of communications in the future.

4. **Update by Anne-Laure Gassin on EFSA communications activities**

4.1 AL Gassin updated the group on EFSA’s communications activities and outreach to stakeholders including: the recent publication of the opinion related to animal transport and UK BSE status; the upcoming publication on the EFSA website of the report of the GMO consultation; follow-up to the learnings from the Paeps report concerning communications; and upcoming availability of EFSA’s annual report in French and German.

AL Gassin also informed the group of the forthcoming publication by EUFIC of a handbook on risk communications for which Irene van Geest and she would be drafting a chapter on the practical aspects of risk communications. This matter was discussed in an expert group meeting organised by EUFIC, and chaired by Irene van Geest, in the margins of the Safefood conference held in Cork, Ireland on 3-4 June at which AL Gassin presented EFSA’s approach with regards to risk communication.

4.2 The members discussed the importance of risk communication in the food area and how risk communications approaches have evolved in the last decades. Notably, the need to communicate possible risk, or risk in the context of uncertainty, required new approaches, and close co-ordination between risk assessors and risk managers so that the public can receive consistent advice.

AL Gassin indicated that the circulation of templates summarising key issues for each country is a first attempt at sharing information between members regarding what risk communication means in the various countries. Members expressed the need to better understand the organisation of the communications function in the national authorities as well as the overall approach to risk communications followed in each country. Following suggestions from France and the UK, AL Gassin proposed to allow time at each meeting of the Working Group for 1 or 2 countries to illustrate how risk communication is handled at national level, the risk communications environment, as well as the principal themes and challenges.

4.3 AL Gassin went on to provide further explanation regarding the Advisory Forum event which will take place in Berlin on 8-9 November. The aim of this event is to make the role and the responsibilities of the AF known to a broader audience. The first day will address risk assessment and future developments in that field as well as the role of the Advisory Forum and its relationship with EFSA. The second day will consider the different aspects of risk benefit analysis. Members highlighted the need to carefully explain the concept of “risk benefit” analysis which might not always be understood by the public. AL Gassin indicated that EFSA would seek to involve the Advisory Forum Working Group on Communications in publicizing the event, and specifically requested that members provide assistance in selecting a list of key media to be invited to the conference.
5. Presentation by Helga Odden Reksnes, Director of Communication, National Veterinary Institute, Norway

5.1 H. O. Reksnes, presented the HEATOX Project, and more specifically, the risk communication and dissemination package which she is co-ordinating. The end deliverables for the communications package are to: provide guidelines to consumers on healthy home cooking and consumption of cooked foods; to develop a manual on strategies to food industries and restaurants to minimise acrylamide formation; and to develop guidelines to good risk communication practice related to heat-induced toxicants. The group discussed the principles of the draft communications strategy presented by Helga Reksnes as well as the expected outputs. The Advisory Forum Communications Working Group proposed to provide input to the development of the “HEATOX” best practice guidelines on risk communications and to participate in the further dissemination of communications outputs from this project. The opportunity for exchange was greatly appreciated by members and H. Reksnes was warmly thanked for her participation in the working group meeting.

6. Update by Thierry Beniflah on the EFSA Extranet project

Thierry Beniflah, EFSA’s Director of IT, updated the members on EFSA’s Extranet project, and Ms. Gwenaëlle Quivy, Webmaster at EFSA, gave a live demonstration of the extranet tool. Some questions related to technical and publication aspects were raised followed by answers from Thierry Beniflah. Following a question from the UK regarding the publication process, and more specifically how content would be controlled, Thierry Beniflah indicated that while the publications process needed still to be defined, the intent was not to establish a centralised approach. Geoffrey Podger confirmed that there would be no central control on publication as this could delay timely communications between Advisory Forum members. He agreed that the source and status of each document (eg draft) would need to be identified. Geoffrey Podger also clarified that while the public would be informed of the creation of an Advisory Forum extranet (indeed information to that effect has already been posted on the EFSA website), its purpose was to facilitate communications between members and help to prepare work and documents for external communications. Moreover a common policy among the members for posting documents on the extranet should be agreed upon.

7. Project research on risk communications on SEM

7.1 Irene van Geest (NL) provided members with an update on the research project to be undertaken by a student in risk communications, Renate Pauw, who will undertake an analysis of communications on semicarbazine in Europe. She will be contacting members in the near future in order to seek information regarding communications undertaken in each country and set up interviews as appropriate. The final analysis and report will be presented at the group’s next meeting on October 7th.
8. Communications: information exchange and forward planning

8.1 Science work programmes: EFSA and AF members

- 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 (presentation subsequently circulated to members).

8.2 Key country issues regarding risk communications (Doc AF Comm WG 15.06.2004-3)

The United Kingdom suggested to circulate the templates of the various countries before the meeting in order to be able to discuss internally in advance. Germany pointed out that although most of the countries seem to be dealing with the same issues, the approach differs and this could be analysed. AL Gassin proposed that the Advisory Forum extranet could be used as a tool for such discussions. It was also decided (cf para 4.2.) to allow time in the agendas of future meetings for Advisory Forum members to present more generally their work in risk communications and key issues being addressed.

In the context of the discussion on key country issues, Neil Martinson (UK) advised the group of a forthcoming communications to be released by the UK FSA on the risks and benefits associated with the consumption of oily fish. Denmark also indicated that the Danish authorities would be releasing further recommendations regarding dioxins in fish; advice concerning obesity and overweight (targeting specifically men/middle aged men); and that further discussions were ongoing regarding how best to address issues concerning vitamin D status of the elderly population and folic acid intakes (eg dietary change, fortification, supplementation …). Members who had not yet reported on key issues for their countries were encouraged to do so.


9.1 AL Gassin and Jan Bloemendal provided further information regarding the crisis management scenario planning exercise to be carried out in the context of the Advisory Forum meeting scheduled 30 September and 1 October. They explained that the purpose of this exercise, which was being developed together with the European Commission, would be to prepare EFSA, the Advisory Forum – and via these—European risk assessors in dealing with urgent incidents and crises and in particular to identify and specify as appropriate the respective roles and responsibilities of EFSA, the Commission and Member States in the context of different scenarios proposed. They clarified that this would not be a full fledged crisis simulation which would be carried out early 2005 and co-ordinated by the European Commission.

9.2 Juliette Chevalier (France) suggested that in order to carry out a crisis exercise, a crisis plan is required and that she was not aware of such a plan. The representative of the European Commission explained that the crisis management plan, although adopted, has
not yet been published but that Member States were aware of its existence and national contacts/members of the Crisis Unit had been identified. She also indicated that further work needed to be done before carrying out a full crisis simulation, including IT developments to support such an exercise, hence this simulation would be conducted in 2005.

9.3. EFSA made the meeting aware of its “in-house procedures for handling a crisis”, which were developed in order to provide the organization with practical information for those who may be called upon in a food safety crisis, including providing scientific data or advice, communications or technical support, or other support functions. The in-house procedures were developed in close co-ordination with the Commission’s own General Crisis Management Plan and is available on the EFSA website.

10. Any other business

10.1 The next meeting of the Advisory Forum Working Group on Communications will be on 7 October.

10.2 Carola Sondermann informed the group of EFSA’s intent to profile the work of national authorities in upcoming editions of the EFSA newsletter, and called on volunteers to support EFSA in this task.

10.2 The Chair closed the meeting by thanking members for their fruitful contributions, and especially the guest speaker Helga Reksnes, as well as the EFSA team for the well organised meeting in Parma. Following suggestions from the group that meetings take place, as for the Advisory Forum, in different countries of the EU, the members were invited to put forward official invitations for hosting future meetings of the Communications Working Group in their respective Headquarters. This could be an occasion for getting to know better the national authorities responsible for risk assessment in the EU, and in particular, the functioning and the organisation of the Communications Departments.