

**15th PLENARY MEETING OF THE EFSA EXPERT
ADVISORY GROUP ON RISK COMMUNICATIONS (AGRC)**

Meeting date: 24 October 2011
Venue: EFSA
Largo N. Palli 5/A – 43121 Parma – Italy

MINUTES

Members of the Advisory Group on Risk Communications

Chair: Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle, EFSA Executive Director (Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle)

Present: Prof. Claude Fischler, CNRS Paris (CF)
Prof. George Gaskell, London School of Economics (GG)
Prof. Ragnar Löfstedt, King's College London (RL)
Prof. Ortwin Renn, University of Stuttgart (OR)

Apologies: Massimiano Bucchi
Maria Daniel Vaz de Almeida

European Food Safety Authority:

Anne-Laure Gassin, Director of Communications (ALG)
Hubert Deluyker, Director of Scientific Cooperation and Assistance (HD)
Laura Smillie, Acting Head of EDIT Unit (LS)
Dirk Detken, Head of Unit LRA (DD)
Luisa Venier, LRA Unit (LV)
Victoria Villamar, EXO Unit (VV)
Elvire Deperrois, EXO Unit (ED)

1 Welcome and introduction

Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle welcomed participants to the meeting and mentioned that apologies had been received from Maria Daniel Vaz de Almeida. As she has been unable to attend some previous meetings, Maria Daniel Vaz de Almeida had suggested that she resign from this group as she could not give due attention to the important work being undertaken. The group was appreciative of this offer but felt it unnecessary. Attracting new members to the group will be discussed at the next meeting as EFSA will be required to prepare group renewal in Spring 2013.

2 Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted without amendments or additions.

3 Minutes of the previous meeting and matters arising

The minutes of the last meeting were agreed. All action points from the previous meeting had been addressed and many of the day's agenda items addressed these actions and implementation plans. There was one point for clarification that LS will follow-up with Ortwin Renn regarding wording in the previously published minutes that may require further clarification.

4 Declarations of interest

No Specific Dols for the meeting were provided.

5 Update on EFSA's activities

Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle provided an update on key activities that EFSA had undertaken since the last meeting in spring 2011. In particular, she focussed on the *E. coli* outbreak in Germany and France that took place between May – July. Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle explained that this was the most serious public health outbreak that EFSA had been confronted with since its inception. Risk communications also played a very important role in the way that events unfolded.

Ragnar Löfstedt remarked that Germany had not managed communications well.

Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle explained the exceptional and highly valued role that EFSA undertook in the outbreak investigation, outlining the trace forward and trace back mechanisms. EFSA took leadership, and Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle explained that there were questions asked about whether or not this was more of a Risk Management function but outlined at the time the work requested by the European Commission needed to be done, urgently and EFSA had the necessary knowledge and know-how to assist. George Gaskell said that EFSA must be credited for this.

Claude Fischler had noted that US reports on the EU outbreak noted surprise that Europe had not previously considered sprouts to be a high risk product.

Hubert Deluyker clarified the different roles played by EFSA and ECDC during the outbreak. Group members were interested by the role of the epidemiological studies. Hubert Deluyker explained that at the peak of the crisis there were 50 new cases per day.

Claude Fischler commented that it was a very interesting case and yet another example of consumer perception about “ingredients are not food”.

George Gaskell asked if there was a role for an independent, external expert who could be called upon to provide advice as those involved in such crises can have tunnel vision and a `devil`s advocate` may be a valuable contribution.

Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle explained that this was the type of role EFSA played, also providing direct to consumer advice in collaboration with ECDC and ensuring that communications were aligned with other organisations such as WHO Europe.

George Gaskell wondered if EFSA was going to play this role every time, whether Member States would be inclined not to build up national competencies as in the event something went wrong, EFSA would be there. Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle explained that the competency starts at MS level and is critical.

Ragnar Löfstedt mentioned that this too was the case for risk communications that in some cases people tasked with risk communications responsibilities have very little experience in this area.

Anne-Laure Gassin explained that this was one of the reasons why the risk communications guidelines project had been initiated through the Advisory Forum’s Communications Working Group (AFCWG).

Claude Fischler wondered about the role of Anses, Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle explained that the risk management aspects had been managed by the Institut de Veille Sanitaire (INVS).

A general discussion ensued about biological outbreaks in recent years. Learning about the results of the recent BfR research on consumer perception of dioxins versus *E. coli*, Claude Fischler found it fascinating that bacterial risks are not considered to be real risks, when in fact the threat was far greater. The group agreed that it was a pity that there are no NGOs championing public health issues such as zoonotic diseases, as there are in the US. Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle explained EFSA’s initiative to present its work on zoonoses to the European Parliament and how it had been well received.

In terms of identifying real public health risks, Hubert Deluyker explained that as part of its Science Strategy, EFSA would undertake a risk ranking exercise. He explained that this in turn could have an influence on the resources allocated to risk communications.

Anne-Laure Gassin explained that media interest in EFSA’s work is not always related to the biggest public health issues and that in 2010 for instance, 10% of media enquiries received by EFSA were about bisphenol A.

6 Update on Communications Activities

Anne-Laure Gassin provided an overview on communications activities including the re-organisation of the Communications Directorate.

Following on from the important remarks made about public health risks, Anne-Laure Gassin presented some of the challenges that EFSA is currently facing regarding the selective use of science by some stakeholders, challenging in particular scientific uncertainties and arguing that these are sufficient to invoke the precautionary principle.

Ragnar Löfstedt asked about EFSA's capacity to liaise with media and third party endorsers.

Anne-Laure Gassin responded emphasising the importance of media relations, but noted that for this activity being based in Parma can be disadvantageous. She explained that the media relations team organised informal meetings with media and the Executive Director Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle and that these are opening doors for dialogue. She highlighted that working with third party endorsement is difficult given the objective nature of the Authority's work.

George Gaskell explained that there is excellent literature on conspiracy theory that supports: in times of uncertainty, certain groups excel on inflating latent concerns. The group also stated that this was an inevitability as science can become a political agenda point and expressed pessimism that EFSA would be able to challenge unfair representation of science.

George Gaskell expressed his opinion stating that it was the responsibility of the scientific community at large to challenge this perspective.

Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle volunteered that perhaps in the absence of information on other aspects of decision-making, science is used as it is readily available through organisations like EFSA.

Ragnar Löfstedt highlighted that in such cases, EFSA's level of commitment to transparency will not work in the organisation's favour.

Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle responded that we need to provide scientific facts, although due to pressure, certain third parties are setting priorities.

Claude Fischler empathised and stated that this goes against the reason why EFSA exists – which is to define real risks from those driven by political agendas.

Hubert Deluyker agreed and highlighted that the Authority's risk monitoring capacity needs to be further developed in support of this.

Claude Fischler underlined that this is why EFSA's communications remit is so important. Scientists are becoming more specialised yet there is a need for a global perspective – networking – consensus building. Scientists are being asked non-scientific questions.

In the interest of time, the agenda items on thematic communications and innovation were not discussed.

9 Independence

Dirk Detken gave a presentation of EFSA's draft Policy on Independence and Scientific Decision making Processes. He outlined that this was presented to a group of 140 stakeholders in Brussels earlier that month following an online public consultation.

Ortwin Renn had participated as a key speaker and panel participant at this event; he provided the group with the following feedback:

- 1) Very well thought through event
 - a. Helped to conciliate extreme views
 - b. Honest and transparent approach
 - c. Increased understanding of internal processes

- 2) No reconciliation on certain key points.
 - a. According to some, financial contributions from industry should be banned
 - b. Process transparency – whatever is said by EFSA should be on the EFSA website

- 3) Interesting debate on data input
 - a. Confidentiality
 - b. Use only peer-review literature
 - c. Publish all data being used

Ortwin Renn summarised concluding that the event was necessary and that EFSA had made significant efforts to show its openness towards these discussions.

A discussion on the merits and in some cases the disadvantages of openness and transparency ensued. George Gaskell gave the example that LSE's commitment to transparency had become very labour intensive.

Ragnar Löfstedt asked if EFSA's efforts had been benchmarked.

Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle explained that this was indeed the case and that an independent consultant had looked into similar organisations and that the results were very encouraging for EFSA.

The group then discussed the advantages of opening up scientific meetings to the public. George Gaskell felt that objections to scientific meetings taking place in public are weak as it goes against the fundamental scientific processes that are open to peer-review.

The group suggested piloting such an initiative, recognising that there is a need to de-dramatise the closed door effect and that controversial areas of science should be included in the test phase.

An example was given in reference to the freedom of information act in the United States – research has shown that just because it is there, it proves nothing dark is happening behind closed doors. This has been found to help create a climate for trust with appropriate reassurance. When the White House office opened up, there was lots of interest at first but after two months it died down.

10 Eurobarometer – update on LSE research

George Gaskell presented his further analysis of the Eurobarometer data. In general the group found the results very interesting. Alternative suggestions were discussed for categorisation and the need to weight the data. It was agreed that BMI should be included as a question in the next survey.

Ragnar Löfstedt asked what the long term plans were for the data. There was general agreement that EFSA should aim to publish a paper on the results.

Anne-Laure Gassin explained that LSE will be invited to present the results to the Advisory Forum Communications Working Group on 6-7 December.

11 Risk communication guidelines

Laura Smillie provided the group with a status update on the Risk Communications Guideline initiative. The group provided their feedback, suggesting that further clarity could be provided in the following areas: classification of risks, state of knowledge and quality of science. It was also suggested that the importance of early communications could be highlighted more.

The group reiterated their support for the initiative and said that they would be pleased to read again and could share with other colleagues as necessary. Ortwin Renn will provide a preface on behalf of the AGRC.

Closure of the meeting

Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle thanked the group for their valuable contribution.