European Food Safety Authority

COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTORATE

16th PLENARY MEETING OF THE EFSA ADVISORY GROUP ON RISK COMMUNICATIONS (AGRC)

Meeting date: **27 February 2012**

Venue: **EFSA**
Via Carlo Magno, 1A, 43126 Parma – Italy

MINUTES

Members of the Advisory Group on Risk Communications

Chair: Anne-Laure Gassin, Director of Communications (ALG)

Present: Prof. Massimiano Bucchi, Università di Trento (MB)
Prof. Claude Fischler, CNRS Paris (CF)
Prof. George Gaskell, London School of Economics (GG)
Prof. Ragnar Löfstedt, King's College London (RL)

Apologies: Prof. Ortwin Renn
Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle

<u>European Food Safety Authority:</u>
Per Bergman, Director of Scientific Evaluation of Regulated Products (PB)
Hubert Deluyker, Director of Scientific Cooperation and Assistance (HD)
Dirk Detken, Head of Unit LRA (DD)
Claudia Heppner, Acting Director of Risk Assessment and Scientific Assistance (CH)
Laura Smillie, Acting Head of EDIT Unit (LS)
Victoria Villamar, EXO Unit (VV)

1 Welcome and introduction

Anne-Laure Gassin welcomed participants to the meeting and gave apologies from the group's Chair EFSA Executive Director Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle. Apologies had also been received from Professor Ortwin Renn.

2 Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted without amendments or additions.

3 Declarations of interest

Specific Declarations of Interest were submitted and processed for the meeting with no matters requiring follow up.

4 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.

5 Update on EFSA's activities

ALG started by welcoming the group to its first meeting in EFSA's new seat. She explained that EFSA's doors re-opened in the new seat on 5 January 2012 and the Authority was fully operational since the beginning. Scientific meetings smoothly resumed during the first week of activities. The new seat is equipped with state-of-the-art technology (including tele-working and video conferencing facilities) to enhance the networking with experts, and facilitate business continuity in regular and crisis times, thus reinforcing EFSA's potential to efficiently fulfil its mission. A wider use of tele-meetings will increase cost efficiency and help reduce the carbon footprint of EFSA"s activities.

On 4 January a small selection of local media visited the new EFSA premises and the Media Relations team organised interviews with the Executive Director and the Resources and Support Director regarding the move (highlighting the environmental aspects of the building) and EFSA"s presence in Parma.

The group collectively commented on the advantages that this move brings to EFSA.

ALG proceeded to explain changes to EFSA's organisational structure that had further changes starting 1 January 2012. The Corporate Services Unit (CORSER) started dealing with the organisation of EFSA"s events, logistical and infrastructure services, as well as the proofreading and translation activities (both of these activities were previously in the Communications Directorate). The Food Ingredient and Packaging Unit (FIP) now provides secretariat support to the Panels on Food additives and nutrient sources added to food (ANS) and Food contact materials, enzymes, flavourings and processing aids (CEF). From a communications perspective, the Media Relations Team has been integrated into the Editorial team, forming the new Editorial and Media Relations Unit (EDIT).

ALG continued to explain how the organisation is changing in order to respond to future challenges supported by key strategies and plans.

The broadening of the scientific discourse to multi-disciplinary risk assessments has already been under way for some time and ALG illustrated by giving EFSA's work on the modernisation of meat inspection, antimicrobial resistance as examples.

EFSA will continue to ensure it performs to the highest standards through the development of state-of-the-art, harmonised methodologies and the collection and analysis of quality data. Major progress has been made during the past decade in developing methodologies, but further harmonisation is required within EFSA, with Member States, with other EU agencies and internationally.

EFSA will also further develop its proactive, integrated approach to identifying and evaluating emerging risks.

At an organisational level the Authority will seek to improve mid-term planning to better predict workloads enabling the optimisation of its resources by leveraging its own internal scientific expertise and reducing the workload of its external scientific experts related to routine scientific work. In order to do this, EFSA's Science Strategy stresses the importance of increased risk assessment training.

Concluding her update on the organisation, ALG outlined that during the course of EFSA's 10th anniversary year an event will be organised in cooperation with DG SANCO to take stock and look at the future of EFSA based on EFSA's external evaluation and subsequent Management Board recommendations.

Furthermore, the Authority's strategic plan will be revised based on the external evaluation and Management Board recommendations as well as upcoming trends and challenges. It will most likely be for the years 2014-2018, but could be up until 2020.

6 Update on Communications Activities

ALG further explained the rationale for integrating the Media Relations team into the Editorial Unit and highlighted that the new organisation facilitates the implementation of the communication strategy and in particular EFSA's thematic approach to communications.

Having previously presented the thematic concept to the group, ALG gave an update on illustrating what had been achieved since the Communications Strategy 2010-2013 began to be implemented last year, following its adoption in December 2010. The aim of the thematic approach is to give context and further meaning to the Authority's scientific work, ALG explained that a suite of outputs has been rolled-out to support its work in the area of zoonoses, including comprehensive videos, content on the EFSA website and the publication of a series of factsheets to coincide with a high-level meeting on zoonoses held in the European Parliament in autumn 2011.

George Gaskell (GG) commented that it was only now that he fully understood the concept and was impressed with EFSA's vision and implementation, commenting that the additional context will surly benefit greater understanding of the Authority's work.

7 Update on Independence & EFSA's Implementing Rules

Dirk Detken (DD) gave a presentation on EFSA's Policy on Independence and Scientific Decision making Processes as well as the Authority's Implementing Rules.

The Policy on Independence and Scientific Decision-Making Processes integrates in one document the wide range of initiatives EFSA has put in place to uphold its core values of scientific excellence, openness, independence and transparency. It was explained that EFSA intends to hold an information session on 5 March 2012 with stakeholders in Brussels to present the Implementing Rules of this policy. Per Bergman outlined how the new implementing rules provided greater clarity and transparency as to how interests are assessed by EFSA as well as clear documentation of assessments and decisions made regarding interests declared.

Transparency efforts were lauded by the group, though they warned that the more information that is disclosed the more vulnerable the organisation is and the more detractors can criticise EFSA.

ALG explained what EFSA was doing from a proactive communications perspective and opened the floor for debate and comment regarding what more EFSA could be doing with regards to its communications on independence.

George Gaskell indicated that when confronted with criticism such as those addressed to EFSA with respect to its scientific work that 4 options could be considered: to ignore (on the basis that the criticism is exaggerated/not realistic); to provided a detailed set of counterarguments (likely to be a never-ending conversation); to accept some and reject others (on what basis?); and to take some back to the scientific community for serious consideration. These could relate for instance to risk assessment methodology (e.g. use of Good Laboratory Practice or OECD guidelines) or to the prioritisation of risks (how are public health risks prioritised in a world of limited resources).

Massimiano Bucchi (MB) pointed to the difficulties inherent in communicating on independence, an abstract concept which is not newsworthy in and of itself. He indicated that alliances could be sought with scientific academies with respect to coherence in defining the concept as scientists themselves have different views/practices regarding independence of the scientific process.

Ragnar Löfstedt (RL) stressed the importance of involving third parties in the debate on the independence of science, which was not a new issue to the world of science. He also informed about the creation of a new informal working group on risk-based policy making in the European Parliament sponsored by MEP Julie Girling and which would be reviewing the application of risk management principles to European policy-making and European Parliament decision-making.

Victoria Villamar (VV) highlighted that EFSA has a mission – that of providing impartial science to protect consumers from food-related risks – as opposed to the campaign agenda of certain third parties. She also stated that EFSA was keen to defend the reputation of its experts who can be attacked unfairly in the context of the debate on independence of science.

Claude Fischler (CF) spoke about the conundrum presented by governments who on the one hand need and depend on independent science to inform policy-making but on the other hand seek to promote public/private partnerships (i.e. in scientific research). EFSA should aim to reframe the debate as opposed to involving itself unduly in the debate as laid down by others.

Laura Smillie (LS) referred back to the SAFE FOODS project which sought to establish a process for the framing of questions put to risk assessors taking into account societal concerns. Could it be beneficial to have a “social sciences” version of EFSA?

GG stressed the importance of developing a rational strategy for directing public resources to address the public health threats; there is a need to define/agree criteria under which risks get addressed with resources allocated accordingly.

With respect to framing, MB suggested that the debate could be reframed focussing on “how many times EFSA got it right”.

The AGRC will be kept informed by EFSA with respect to the implementation of its policy on independence and scientific decision-making processes as well as related communications initiatives.

8 Results from the LSE Eurobarometer analysis and Preparation for Presentation to the Member States

GG presented the topline findings on two key aspects from the LSE research analysing the Eurobarometer (EB) 2010 on food-related risks: 1) food risks in the public mind, and 2) trust in the food chain, food safety regulators and informers. GG highlighted that there are three types of risk: concern about contamination and adulteration, concern about a healthy diet, and diet-related acute and chronic illnesses. This is universal across Europe. Concern about food-related risks has largely been stable between 2005 and 2010, with noteworthy exceptions (e.g. BSE, allergies). GG also mentioned that trust in public authorities has remained largely unchanged since 2005. In about a third of the countries, a greater percentage of respondents trust authorities to act quickly when citizen’s health is in danger, and also have greater trust in public authorities doing a good job of keeping the public informed. Scientists and food safety authorities (national and European) are generally highly trusted to give accurate information about serious food risk. Attitudes towards food and concern about food-related risk are more linked to individual perception and largely unrelated to socio-demographic categories. The perception that food has become safer than it was 10 years ago, engagement with food, the extent to which food is perceived as a stressor and low generalised risk sensitivity are conducive to greater trust in public authorities.

Members discussed the differences in response to the open and closed questions on risk perception (Q3/Q4) and whether the closed question (allowing choice between predetermined hazards) could accentuate risk perception with respect to food and diet. This methodological issue could have implications for future Eurobarometers. Members also discussed the role of food as pleasure or stressor and that further research was needed in this area, and how this basic attitude to food then relates to/affects risk perception.

9 Closure of the meeting

ALG thanked the group for their valuable contribution and closed the meeting.