

Communication and External Relations Department, EXREL Unit

Stakeholder Engagement

2017 Roundtable with NGOs

Brussels, 14 November 2017

1. Background

Stakeholders have been contributing to the work of the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) since it was established in 2002. Now, as a part of its five-year strategy¹, EFSA has committed to prioritising public and stakeholder involvement in the process of risk assessment.

On 15 June 2016, EFSA's Management Board adopted a Decision on the criteria for establishing of a list of registered stakeholders and the establishment of the Stakeholder Forum and Stakeholder Bureau². This Decision underpins EFSA's new Stakeholder Engagement Approach³ (SEA) and is linked to a multi-annual, wide-ranging EFSA project: Transparency and Engagement in Risk Assessment (TERA).

The overall purpose of the SEA is to provide stakeholders with a better understanding of EFSA's scientific decision-making processes and to improve the quality of EFSA's scientific outputs to better meet stakeholders' needs.

The SEA is designed to give representatives of seven stakeholder categories – consumer associations, food industry and business, farmer organisations, environmental NGOs, distributors, practitioners and academia – the opportunity to engage with EFSA and to provide input at different stages of the risk assessment and risk communications process. A number of permanent and targeted engagement mechanisms have been set up to enable this to happen. Organisations that meet the eligibility criteria are confirmed as registered stakeholders and assigned to one of seven stakeholder categories under the SEA. The list of registered stakeholders has remained open since the initial call and an assessment of new applications has been carried out on a quarterly basis by EFSA's Stakeholder team.

EFSA's Roundtable meetings are a targeted engagement tool designed to provide specific stakeholder groups with an opportunity to engage with EFSA on issues of relevance to the group in question.

There are currently two Roundtable initiatives active under the SEA: one for the environmental NGOs and advocacy groups; and one for the business and food industry group⁴. This report summarises the 9th NGO roundtable organised by EFSA, which took place in Brussels on 14 November 2017. It was the first NGO Roundtable held under the framework of the SEA and, as such, was attended a larger number of NGOs than in previous years. NGO expressed satisfaction with the discussion and interaction during the meeting.

¹ <http://www.efsa.europa.eu/en/corporate/pub/strategy2020>

² <http://www.efsa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/Document18992.pdf>

³ http://www.efsa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EFSA%20Stakeholder%20engagement%20approach_FINAL.pdf

⁴ <http://www.efsa.europa.eu/en/events/event/171114>

2. Roundtable with NGOs edition 2017

The Roundtable with NGOs took place in Brussels on 14 November 2017. The meeting was attended by 12 of the 16 NGOs registered as EFSA stakeholders under the NGO category⁵ and represented a balance between stakeholders that have engaged with EFSA frequently in the past and stakeholders for which this was the first engagement activity with the Authority. Representatives of the European Commission (DG SANTE) attended in an observer capacity.

The Roundtable was chaired by the Head of EFSA's Scientific Evaluation of Regulated Products Department, Guilhem de Sèze, and was supported by various EFSA staff responsible for different scientific and corporate dossiers.

The objective of the meeting was to engage with NGOs, exchange on recent stakeholder engagement initiatives, provide the latest updates on EFSA activities which may be of interest to NGOs, and to seek feedback and suggestions to continuously improve our way of working together in the future.

The agenda was co-drafted with participants and designed with a view to allow space for interaction and questions during the meeting. At the beginning of the meeting participants were asked to express their expectations from the meeting and from engagement with EFSA in general terms.

2.1 Discussion Points

Implementation of Stakeholder Engagement

NGO representatives inquired about the practical application of SEA, including the modus operandi of targeted and permanent mechanisms, public consultations, and calls for data. Several organisations participated at the meeting for the first time, and for them this was an opportunity to obtain more information about different aspects of EFSA work, including who tasks EFSA, how stakeholders can suggest ideas for EFSA's self-tasking activities, how guidance documents are produced, and how to request a technical meeting with EFSA.

NGOs were keen to understand what practical options for engagement they have and where and when they can contribute to EFSA risk assessment.

NGOs also raised questions related to the way in which EFSA categorises organisations for the purpose of maintaining its list of registered stakeholders. It was apparent that certain organisations faced difficulties at the point of registration when having to propose an appropriate stakeholder category to join as they felt that the seven available categories did not necessarily accurately reflect their organisational structure or interests. This feedback was noted and

⁵ <http://www.efsa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/event/171114sh-list.pdf>

has subsequently been addressed by EFSA in its interim report on the effectiveness of the SEA⁶.

NGO representatives showed a high level of interest in EFSA's policy on independence and the prevention of conflicts of interest. Various aspects of EFSA's independence policy⁷ were discussed, including how financial interests are assessed, EFSA's use of hearing experts in the scientific process, and more generally the rules how to encourage high-quality scientists to work with EFSA in light of the restrictions placed on them by the implementing rules that underpin the independence policy⁸. EFSA explained the policy in detail, including the elements which are new compared to previous versions. A fact sheet about EFSA's independence policy is available on EFSA's website⁹.

Targeted Engagement Mechanisms

NGO representatives were invited to share views on their experiences of participation in different engagement mechanisms with EFSA. The Focus Group on GMO allergenicity was presented as a good example of engagement where NGOs were able to contribute their expertise and knowledge to the scientific process, working alongside EFSA Staff and experts. In addition, participants that took part in the work of the Bee Partnership Discussion Group and shared their positive experience.

Discussions continued on the stakeholder consultation group for the joint European Chemicals Agency (ECHA) and EFSA guidance document on criteria to identify endocrine disruptors, which was active during 2017. The group was created to engage stakeholders on initial versions of the draft Guidance Document prior to it being launched for public consultation. The group consists of registered stakeholders representing NGOs, industry, practitioners and academia¹⁰. NGOs were interested to understand the process of identification of stakeholder experts as members of a consultation group and on the practical contributions they can make to the preparation of guidance document. More information about the selection process for the consultation group on endocrine disruptors is available on EFSA's website¹¹.

The NGOs expressed an interest in exploring how stakeholders might be involved in the thinking and decisions behind the launch of new targeted discussion and consultation groups to improve the likelihood that the topics chosen match their interests and to increase their participation. In this context, they stressed the

⁶ <http://www.efsa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/event/mb171212-i3.pdf>

⁷ [EFSA's Policy on Independence \(2017\)](#)

⁸ Decision of the Executive Director of the European Food Safety Authority on Competing Interest Management http://www.efsa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/corporate_publications/files/competing_interest_management_17.pdf

⁹ <http://www.efsa.europa.eu/en/corporate/pub/independencepolicy171026>

¹⁰ <https://www.efsa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eastopic-stakeholders-edguidance-minutes170210.pdf>

¹¹ <http://www.efsa.europa.eu/en/press/news/170113-0>

<http://www.efsa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/wgs/pesticides/members-Consultation-Group-endocrine-disruption-guidance.pdf>

importance of timely communication and asked for pre-announcement of EFSA's calls for stakeholder interest to participate in such engagement activities. EFSA agreed that it will address this feedback through better targeted communication tools such as a public consultation planner and through its Stakeholder Newsletter.

Risk Communication and Reputation

NGOs that provided input to the Communicators Lab were pleased with the set-up of this engagement mechanism. The Communicators Lab ("Comms lab") is a new initiative under the SEA designed to elicit feedback from EFSA's stakeholders on the usability of specific communication products that EFSA develops. In practical terms, this means that EFSA may consult stakeholders on, for example, the format or template for a new multimedia product to check its relevance and accessibility as a communication tool. This led to a related discussion on the accessibility of EFSA's website which, according to participants, is sometimes difficult to browse due to the large amount of information that it holds.

In relation to the discussion on EFSA's Reputation Barometer¹² NGOs focussed on possible improvements in how scientific messages are communicated. They suggested that in order to raise understanding and visibility of EFSA's work more attention is needed to target groups that do not have previous experience of engaging with EFSA.

NGOs welcomed the new initiatives that EFSA is undertaking in the area of data and methodology transparency, including the Authority's "Knowledge Junction", "Crowd Sourcing" and "Prometheus" projects. They were interested to understand better how to ensure that stakeholder input on methods and data is relevant and reliable.

3. General Remarks and Next Steps

Other general discussion points raised by NGOs during the meeting included the need to match EFSA's expectations for stakeholder engagement with NGOs ability to participate, bearing in mind the limited human and financial resources they have at their disposal. NGOs also provided practical recommendations on how to improve information sharing between EFSA and stakeholders and requested that EFSA alert them to upcoming initiatives that may be of interest to them.

In summing up, NGO expressed satisfaction with the discussion and interaction during the meeting. Those NGOs new to EFSA's work appreciated efforts by the Authority to explain the opportunities open to them for engagement.

¹² <http://www.efsa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/event/mb171212-i2.pdf>

On basis of the discussions during the meeting, EFSA committed to exploring new and more efficient ways of providing regular updates to stakeholders, tailored according to the needs of different groups, particularly in relation to ongoing and upcoming work and consultations.

This should go beyond the traditional channels already in place (e.g. newsletters) and should include, for example, personalised communication to individual or small groups of stakeholders depending on the issue at hand. Finally, EFSA shall continue with efforts to consult stakeholders at the early stages of guidance development.