



European Food Safety Authority

Report of the Management Board Team Building Day

Brussels 29/30 November 2002

Objective of the Team Building Day

Board members as individuals have very different backgrounds, expertise, nationalities and speak different languages. Since the Board was constituted in September, members have had very little opportunity to develop into a team and learn to work together. The purpose of the day was not to form opinions, draw conclusions or reach decisions but to enable members to gain a greater understanding of one another's views and thoughts concerning the new Authority.

The overall objectives therefore were to spend some time to build a cohesive team spirit and mutual understanding, to give members an opportunity to interact with each other and through discussion, start to find common ground on the scope and general direction of the Authority within the framework of the founding Regulation.

The day had been arranged with 12 members able to participate on the date but due to unforeseen circumstances and illness in the end 9 members participated. The members were placed randomly in different workshops which were changed during the day. This was to ensure that each member had the opportunity to discuss issues with all other members.

The discussions focused on four main themes:

1. Communication
2. Scientific risk assessment
3. Non EU interaction
4. The added value of the Authority

Discussion

1. Communication

It was generally felt that the confidence of consumers needs to be rebuilt. Open transparent working methods with good effective communications would be essential to reach this end. Not only has confidence been lost in the food supply over the past few years but also in the official systems that are there to protect the consumer: that is, the national and European regulatory authorities; the control authorities; the legislation itself; and the science on which much of the other work is based. It was felt that it would be important to ensure that EFSA communicates accurately, in a timely and understandable manner to the risk manager.

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A view was expressed that in this respect the Authority will need to have a wide view of whom the risk managers are and ensure that information is communicated in such a way that it is relevant to them so that they can take the necessary action to avoid, reduce or eliminate the risk. The risk manager may be the regulator in the Commission, Member State or parliament; it may be the producer, industry or distributor; it may be the enforcement official; or it may be the consumer/general public. These different risk managers need accurate information available in a format relevant to them to enable them to take the necessary action. Although the format of the message may be different depending on the audience, the overall content and information base must be the same.

Good overall co-ordination between the key players would be desirable so that contradictory messages on food safety could be avoided. It was also felt that the Authority should be able to gauge risk perceptions in the different Member States and also the effectiveness of its communication activities.

Overall transparency would be a key theme for the Authority and consideration must be given to making the Authority's work as accessible as possible.

2. Scientific Risk Assessment

Science provides the basis for food safety legislation and is the core business of the Authority. It is important therefore that EFSA operates using the highest standards of scientific excellence and that it is seen to be undertaking scientific work free of influences that could effect its scientific rigour. There needs to be a high level of confidence in this work which will be develop only if the Authority can gain a reputation for independence and excellence. The key matter is not just independence but transparency in the scientific and other work of the Authority so that others are able to judge how independent it is.

The Authority must be able to have access to the best scientists and it is important that the scientists that populate the Authority's Committee and Panels are of the highest calibre.

Risk assessment methods must be consistent and high standards should be applied to risk assessments. The risk assessment methodologies themselves must be able to withstand the most thorough scrutiny.

It was felt that the language of risk assessment is obscure to those who are not involved in risk analysis matters and therefore the Authority would need to be able to find more accessible language to communicate risk assessment outcomes and other scientific information.

Co-operation on risk assessment and other scientific work undertaken at the national level should be enhanced through networks managed by the Authority. It was felt that the Advisory Forum would be critically important in developing close links on scientific matters between the Authority and the national authorities.

3. Non EU interactions

It was felt that the European Food Safety Authority would become a key global player in food safety and risk assessment matters once operational. Many food safety concerns in Europe are also concerns in other parts of the world. Food safety hazards found in Europe are also found in many third countries and many foods are traded

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globally. Therefore key trading partners may have an interest in developing similar methods to examine and assess risks to health and to share information.

4. Added Value of the European Food Safety Authority

It is important that the Authority adds value to the existing systems for scientific advice in the Community at both European and national level. The visible separation of the responsibility for risk assessment in the Authority from the Commission which has the responsibility for risk management is in itself a positive move. The Authority will add value in a concrete manner once it is operational, provided that it develops high standards of scientific excellence and is able to work closely with the national authorities.

It is clear that many national authorities, particularly in the smaller Member States, do not have experts in all fields covered by the EFSA and by bringing scientists together from all over Europe, the Authority will provide scientific opinions and advice that would not otherwise be available in some Members States.

In the main the added value will become evident when the Authority is able to bring about collaboration and co-operation on scientific matters with the member states. This will help make the best use of both the national and EFSA's resources.

However the Authority would have to be careful not to over stretch its resources both during the set up period and when it is fully operational. It would also need to work hard to build the necessary collaboration and co-operation to be able to meet the great expectations that the public has of the Authority.

Finally:

The Team Building day was successful in bringing together the members of the Board in an informal atmosphere so that members could exchange views and perceptions on the future Authority. No conclusions were drawn from the discussions but members were able to explore one another's views on the problems and key issues facing the Authority in the near and long term future.