European Food Safety Authority

EFSA and its Advisory Forum

Recommendations to enhance the exchange of scientific information in order to facilitate and improve risk assessments of feed and food, EU wide

Report from
the *ad hoc* Advisory Forum Working Group on the Input of National Authorities into the work of EFSA's scientific Committee, Panels and other Expert Groups (INA-AFWG)

Discussed by the Advisory Forum at its meeting on 19th May in Vienna and revised in accordance with the suggestions made during the meeting

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CHAPTER I

EFSA AND ITS ADVISORY FORUM

Introduction

1. The European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) is an independent science-based organisation with the primary function of contributing to the protection of human health throughout the European Union (EU). Its key areas of responsibility are risk assessment (RA) and risk communication on the outcomes of these risk assessments. In close collaboration with national authorities and in open consultation with its stakeholders, EFSA provides objective scientific advice on all matters with a direct or indirect impact on food and feed safety, including animal health and welfare and plant protection. EFSA also offers advice on nutrition in relation to Community legislation. EFSA is founded by EU Regulation 178/2002 and any Article referenced in this document refers to this Regulation.

2. The Advisory Forum (AF) is EFSA's consultative body and consists of representatives – AF Members - from each of the Member States' national food agencies or other national authorities with similar tasks to those of EFSA (art. 27). One of the main functions of the AF is to develop cooperation between EFSA and the national bodies undertaking similar tasks with regard to risk assessment and risk communication. Representatives from the European Commission, Bulgaria, Iceland, Norway, Romania and Switzerland participate in meetings of the Advisory Forum as observers.

3. The Advisory Forum is tasked with advising EFSA on scientific matters, priorities and work programmes. The Forum also forges close links between EFSA and the 25 EU Member States (MS). The goal is to build strong collaborative networking between EFSA and the National food agencies and authorities working in the fields of risk assessment and communication. The Forum also facilitates the sharing of information and collaboration between the National Authorities themselves. Key tasks of the Forum include avoiding duplication of the Authority's scientific risk assessments with those of Member States and ensuring that divergent scientific opinions are prevented or solved.

4. A member of the Advisory Forum represents all the work done on risk assessments on the areas mentioned above, for their respective country. This requires a significant burden of co-ordination work, especially when these tasks are not all conducted by the institution they are working for. However, it is the only way that the AF can fulfill all the tasks and duties required of it.

5. This document supplies recommendations on how to enhance the exchange of scientific information between Members of the Advisory Forum. Sharing information only works if all parties can read these documents. Therefore, the Working Group is of the opinion that as far as possible documents should be circulated in the English language. Whilst recognizing the extra burdens in terms of translation requests, the WG considers that these are by far outweighed by the advantages.

6. Finally, this document does not attempt to provide all the answers but establishes principles for developing cooperation and interaction between the AF members and the institutions they represent.

Ad hoc Working Group on the input of National Authorities into EFSA's scientific work - Terms of Reference

7. The Advisory Forum of EFSA established an ad hoc Working Group (WG) to consider the manner in which exchanges on scientific issues, information and data can be facilitated in the context of the work of EFSA's Scientific Committee, Panels and other Expert Groups. The need to include actions to be taken in situations of normality as well as times of urgency or crisis was included in the tasks of the WG.

8. According to the *Terms of Reference*, the ad hoc AF Working Group was asked to bring forward a clear set of proposals which takes into account the need to ensure that:

- the Scientific Committee, Panels and other Expert Groups are fully aware of relevant work being undertaken by National Authorities or of work undertaken by others which they recommend should be taken into account before beginning to formulate an opinion;
- information submitted by other parties to EFSA can also be made available to National Authorities on the same basis of confidentiality, if applicable;
- the independence of the decision making process of the EFSA Scientific Committee, Panels and other Expert Groups is fully respected;
- National Authorities continue to have advance notice of opinions of EFSA's Scientific Committee, Panels and other Working Groups and of EFSA's related communication strategy.

9. The ad hoc AF Working Group should take account of existing procedures in place to meet the above objectives but is free to make different or additional proposals. Special attention should be paid to further use of electronic routes of communication to facilitate these objectives.

10. The WG consisted of representatives of national authorities, of the Scientific Committee and Panels and of EFSA's staff (see Annex 1) and was chaired by the Director of Science of EFSA. The WG was requested to report back to the Advisory Forum within 12 months from 26 May 2005.

The role of the Advisory Forum as regards EFSA's scientific work

11. The AF is not involved in the production of scientific opinions or to participate in the work of the Scientific Committee/Panels. Its roles are to constitute a mechanism for exchange of information on potential risks and the pooling of knowledge and to ensure close cooperation between EFSA and National Authorities. For example, the AF should ensure that all the relevant information is brought to the at-

tention of the SC and Panels. Then it is the responsibility of the SC and Panels to analyse the information and draw their own independent scientific conclusions. (The SC or Panel remains responsible for considering the information provided and determining how this should be taken into account in their risk assessment. Such information may be incorporated completely, partly or not at all, however they should endeavour to explain the rationale for their decision.)

12. The following practical examples show how the AF could add value, useful information or expertise:

- EFSA informs the AF that it plans to prepare a scientific opinion on a specific topic. AF members should be aware whether in their country scientific assessments and research on the same topic is existing or about to start. In this type of case the AF member shall provide information on these assessments and research to the EFSA Secretariat. The EFSA Secretariat of the Panel would be able to ask the national body for supplementary information and if appropriate, further contributions such as inviting participation of national experts in WG, etc.
- EFSA informs the AF that it plans to commission or request a specific scientific study that it needs for its scientific work. If similar work happens at national level, the AF member shall inform EFSA in order to avoid duplication and to identify the modalities by which the information could be shared. In that case adequate modalities of co-operation could be agreed (sharing of work and costs; mechanisms provided for by Article 36).
- AF informs EFSA of planned national studies involving risk assessment and may invite inputs by other Member States. The AF and EFSA might agree that it would be better to undertake a risk assessment at EU rather than national level.
- EFSA should inform the AF that in order to perform/complete a specific risk assessment, more data (for example on dietary exposure) are needed. In such an event, a system of working similar to that of the SCOOP system under the Scientific Co-operation Directive could be followed with a Working Group managed by EFSA made up of interested Member States. The identification of this type of common interest task could also come from suggestions of one or several of the AF members. The mechanisms of Article 36 could also be used in this type of case.
- In the framework of the preparation of a scientific opinion, EFSA may decide to entrust some preparatory scientific tasks to one of the designated bodies included in the list of the Article 36 networks or other organisations with which it has direct contact on a bilateral basis.
- National bodies might be able to undertake or provide specialist assessments which could assist the SC or Panel in their risk assessment both through in depth consideration of a specialist area and through increasing throughput.
- Where there is a divergence of scientific opinions or the possibility of divergence is identified between a national body and EFSA, the AF could contribute by identifying the types of co-operation that could help to solve the divergence. In some cases, divergences can arise because the scientific data taken into consideration are not the same and meetings between EFSA and the concerned scientific bodies involved could help to solve the problem. Should the informal

route not resolve the divergences then there are procedures under Article 30 to address the situation.

- The AF have a role in ensuring the exchange of national scientific assessments and data, this is discussed in more detail at several places in this document.

Conclusions

13. The WG recognises the development that has occurred, and continues to occur, in the relationship between EFSA and national institutions via the AF and otherwise. The mutual exchange of information and expertise is crucial to the strengthening and development of these interactions. The WG appreciates that the informal interactions have often developed from personal contacts and approaches. The WG considers that there is an opportunity for further development of these interactions through more formalised channels of communication.

CHAPTER II

SCIENTIFIC INFORMATION THAT IS OF INTEREST TO BE EXCHANGED

Scientific data used by the panel members for conducting their risk assessments, i.e. rough data, studies, etc.

14. Data are a collection of facts, measurements, or observations used to make inferences about the world we live in. Data includes both analytical laboratory results and that obtained in social-science research.

15. Data to be shared needs to contribute to the risk assessment either by identifying critical components (e.g. a new toxicology study), decreasing uncertainties (e.g. more detailed exposure data) or providing explanation and interpretation of key elements. This should include data open to different interpretations and a description of the rationale for conclusions reached both by the panel and if questioning this by the National Authority.

16. Both published and unpublished data should be shared. There are issues around the use of unpublished data such as absence of peer review or concerns over data quality and validity. Whilst these should be addressed as potential uncertainties in the risk assessment, data should be provided with as much supporting information as required to permit decisions on quality and validity. It should be recognised however that certain scientific data are obtained or will be used in view of scientific studies which could lead to articles in international media and will not be disclosed before. The WG recommended that all data possibly submitted should be accompanied by a brief English summary page describing the key points.

17. Surveys and exposure estimates should be exchanged with sufficient details to allow for extrapolation from the national population to a European basis.

18. The nature of the assessments scientific panels are conducting, affects the question whether the data used can be exchanged or not. Information used for providing scientific opinions, guidance and advice in response to questions formally posed or undertaken at their own initiative, should be open for exchange between AF Members and scientific panels working on that subject, unless there are specific, objective and justifiable reasons why these documents are considered to be confidential. Information used for assessing the risk of regulated substances and developments of proposals for risk-related factors, is restricted by the regulatory framework and may not be freely exchanged. Documents used for this can usually only be disclosed in cases there is a real public risk.

Sharing of informal national scientific data

19. The AF should have a role in bringing some of the more informal national scientific data produced by MS organisations to the attention of the relevant EFSA Scientific Panel. These data are produced by many different sources, for instance as part of national food monitoring and surveillance programmes, data collected during the food consumption surveys, research projects, statutory food monitoring programmes and investigations of outbreaks of food borne illness. In many cases these data are not published in peer reviewed scientific press and would not usually find their way into international searchable databases. As a result the data may not come to the attention of the EFSA Scientific Panels during their deliberations on scientific opinions.

20. The key issue is that these data may be relevant to the work of the Scientific Panels and Committee and that there is a need to find a mechanism to bring these to the attention of the relevant Panels. A second issue is that these data may be of varying quality and would need to be evaluated in order to be "quality assured". Translating reports from original language, presenting results in a standard format and where necessary, consulting with the originators of the reports for clarification of conclusions is likely to be too much work for members of the Scientific Panels and working groups. Neither would it be the most effective nor efficient use of the limited resources of the EFSA staff that supports the work of the Panels.

21. To address these issues and to assist EFSA, the AF should contribute to:

- the identification of the types of data that are already existing at national level which could be of common interest;
- the collection of these national scientific data and
- the evaluation and presentation of these data wherever possible accompanied by an English summary of key points to the EFSA Scientific Panels.

The AF could contribute to the development of a standard format for submission of data.

22. Such mechanisms would imply that those national organisations which produced these national data and other relevant national organisations having skills and

resources to ensure the evaluation, comparability and presentation of these data co-operate. Such co-operation mechanisms could be established and funded under Article 36.

Meeting documents; agenda, minutes, etc.

23. Currently the agenda and minutes of formal EFSA Panel meetings are published whilst Working Group agendas and minutes or action notes are only circulated to members of the Working Group, and Panel if applicable. There is the potential to provide a lot of insight into the issues that scientific panels and working groups are considering, the progress of work items and the data being used by circulating the agendas and minutes of all EFSA scientific meetings. However, minutes are not verbatim transcripts of the meeting but resumes of the discussion to remind those present of salient points and actions. Therefore there is a high possibility of misunderstandings and misconceptions arising from solely reading the minutes without having attended the meeting. In order to minimise this possibility, minutes require very skilful drafting by the Secretariat, this is resource intensive. In addition linguistic nuances might be overlooked, especially as many of the Secretariat staff would be drafting in their second or third language. In practical terms the Secretariats would be required to produce a three to five fold increase in publishable documents.

24. The Working Group did not consider that producing publishable minutes of all meetings would be useful at national level and be an appropriate commitment of limited EFSA resources, which would be utilised better progressing and facilitating the work of the Panels. It is proposed that the status quo be maintained namely that agendas and minutes of Panel meetings are published permitting transparency and external scrutiny but not those of (ad hoc) Working Groups. In cases where information is needed on the work of WG, contact could be established between EFSA scientific co-ordinators and AF members.

Working Plans and current activities

25. One of the main functions of the AF is to develop cooperation between EFSA and the national bodies undertaking similar tasks with regard to risk assessment. Co-operation could lead to initiatives to perform certain (parts of) risk assessments together or to decide not to embark on a scientific study or risk assessment since others are already doing such work.

26. Sharing annual work programmes or exchanging information on published or planned national scientific opinions could be a very helpful tool for this. Such an exchange of information would help identify overlaps or duplication of work in the risk assessment area. Most agencies prepare annual working or operational programmes and where these have identified areas or topics where risk assessment will be carried out, these could be shared in advance through the AF with EFSA and MS.
AF members could co-ordinate the collection of data or collate work at national level on risk assessments for transmission to EFSA. This could be facilitated through the EFSA web or Extranet. A prerequisite for this is that the relevant AF member is aware

of all the work done at national level regarding food and feed safety and that summaries of the working plans and planned activities will be provided in English.

27. Information on the programmes of work of EFSA and National Authorities should be exchanged and regularly updated through the AF. These should specifically focus on lists of scientific opinions actually prepared or planned, plus a list of scientific studies or collection of data in relation to scientific opinions actually prepared or planned.

Result of the risk assessments – (draft) opinions

28. Informing colleague AF members on preliminary outcomes and final results of risk assessments is one of the basic requirements for the work of the Advisory Forum. It gives the others the possibility: to provide extra (scientific) data; to inform on experts working on this matter; to tie in their own work and to be prepared in terms of questions, further work, etc. once the opinion in issued.

29. Chapter II gives an overview of the advantages and disadvantages of sharing preliminary outcomes of risk assessments during the process. The Chapter concludes that opinions may only be shared at a final stage of the assessments, since at earlier stages there will be a limited idea of the direction the opinion will follow. And, moreover, that it might be premature to circulate initial draft opinions, since: recipients are not necessarily aware of all the information, since initial thoughts and ideas can be freely exchanged and often represent extreme interpretations of the information available and as the opinion can change significantly during the process.

30. However, the Working Group recognised that there might be occasions (e.g. the Scientific Committee opinion on risk assessment of genotoxic and carcinogenic compounds) when the Panel (or EFSA) wishes to consult others on their progress and seek feedback on questions and issues arising during the assessment. Such consultation could also be desired by National authorities on specific sensitive issues.
Under these circumstances, where scientific concern or possible divergence of opinion is identified in the assessment process, it is recommended that hearings or special meetings should be organised on a case by case basis to exchange views. The procedures implementing this approach should be considered in consultation with the AF.

31. The procedure EFSA has already in place on sharing certain opinions with Advisory Forum members and relevant stakeholders before they are published is perceived as very useful. By this Advisory Forum Members get the opportunity to prepare responses to questions from risk managers, stakeholders, media and others in their Member State. The Working Group therefore wishes to recommend that National authorities, via their AF Members, start the same procedure once appropriate.

32. However, the Working Group was also informed that a number of AF Members currently do not have systems in place for progressing this information, hence the Working Group would recommend that each Member establishes procedures for handling these opinions

Conclusions

33. As regards data, it was concluded that both published and unpublished data should be shared amongst AF Members. There are issues around the use of unpublished data such as absence of peer review or concerns over data quality and validity. Whilst these should be addressed as potential uncertainties in the risk assessment, data should be provided with as much supporting information as required to permit decisions on its quality and validity.

34. As regards data available at national level, the AF should contribute to:

- the identification of the types of data that are already existing at national level which could be of common interest;
- the collection of these national scientific data and
- the evaluation and presentation of these data wherever possible accompanied by an English summary of key points to the EFSA Scientific Panels.

The AF could contribute to the development of a standard format for submission of data.

35. Concerning agendas and minutes of scientific meetings, it is proposed that the *status quo* be maintained namely that agendas and minutes of Panel meetings are published permitting transparency and external scrutiny but not those of (ad hoc) Working Groups. In cases where information is needed on the work of WG, contact could be established between EFSA scientific coordinators and AF members.

36. Information on the programmes of work of EFSA and National Authorities should be exchanged and regularly updated through the AF. These should specifically focus on lists of scientific opinions actually prepared or planned, plus a list of scientific studies or collection of data in relation to scientific opinions actually prepared or planned.
AF members could co-ordinate the collection of data or collate work at national level on risk assessments for transmission to EFSA. This could be facilitated through the EFSA web or Extranet. Prerequisites for this are that the relevant AF member is keeping track of all the risk assessments done at national level regarding food and feed safety and that summaries of the working plans and planned activities will be provided in English.

37. The procedure EFSA has already in place on sharing certain opinions with Advisory Forum members and relevant stakeholders before they are published is perceived as very useful. By this advisory Forum members get the opportunity to prepare responses to questions from risk managers, stakeholders, media and others in their Member State. The Working Group therefore wishes to recommend that National Authorities, via their AF Members, start the same procedure once appropriate.

CHAPTER III

APPROPRIATE TIMING FOR SHARING SCIENTIFIC INFORMATION

Introduction

38. There are several points at which the sharing of scientific information between EFSA and National Authorities could be undertaken. These can be summarised as at the start of, part way through and at the end of the risk assessment process.

39. Currently opinions dealing with a particularly sensitive or controversial subject are normally circulated by EFSA to the Advisory Forum for information just prior to publication. The more routine opinions are not generally circulated in this way to minimise information overload on Advisory Forum members and to emphasise the potential impact of the opinions circulated.

40. The main advantages and disadvantages of the different times on when to exchange scientific information are set out below. The conclusions reached by the WG after considering these possibilities are stated at the end of the chapter.

At the very start of a risk assessment process

41. Interacting at the very start of a RA process makes it possible that Advisory Forum members can draw attention to any sensitive aspect within their experience of the issue. It also makes it possible for the members to provide existing relevant national data and inform EFSA of any data (e.g. national exposure study) expected to be available whilst the opinion is being produced. Additionally, Members could identify experts with experience of the issue who might assist the Scientific Committee, Panel or Working Group.

42. However, it should be noted that this cooperation should not introduce any significant delay in producing the opinion. Furthermore at the start no information would be available on the direction of the discussion or likely outcome neither would there be insight into which data and/or views will be considered or discarded.

Halfway through the risk assessment process

43. Sharing tentative, but not definitive, conclusions of an assessment would provide the opportunity for the Panels to consult others before finalising its views and it would allow for a possible reaction from the AF Members.
Also, AF Members would have the opportunity to provide available data not apparently considered in the draft opinion, and inform the EFSA panel of any data (e.g. national exposure study) expected to be available in the near future.

An advantage of circulating preliminary results also could be that AF members could check whether these are consistent with similar question discussed at national level.

44. However, always applying this procedure would likely result in extending the duration of assessments, especially when there would be time required for dialogue and clarification of assessments.
Unless a defined and proscriptive procedure of consultation would be established, there is also a risk of confusion in the assessment process and perceived interference with the independence of the panels. A consultation procedure also should avoid that incomplete or partial opinions prematurely enter the public domain either intentionally or unintentionally.

45. Finally, it should be noted that this would not be suitable or feasible for all opinions and would need to be considered on a case by case basis (depending on legal, practical and other aspects).

At the end of the risk assessment process, prior to publication of the final opinion

46. Receiving final opinions before they are made public gives AF Members the opportunity to prepare for questions which may arise from other scientists, risk managers, stakeholders and media. In this case they receive an insight into the conclusions of the assessment and the data used to reach these conclusions. This procedure was considered to be particularly useful for subjects on a sensitive nature. The Working Group therefore recommends that it should not be limited only to opinions from EFSA but should be extended to opinions prepared in MS.

47. It should be noted, however, that this procedure could not avoid that questions can be raised on aspects of the assessment or on data used or disregarded without having the possibility of meaningful scientific dialogue or input. And, since the time between circulation and publication should be restricted, AF Members would have limited time to assimilate the conclusions in the opinion.

48. Exchanging final opinions before publishing also creates the possibility of discussing and fine-tuning press messages covering the subjects. This advantage should not be underestimated but further developed in the information traffic between the AF Members.

Conclusions

49. Following consideration of the advantages and disadvantages outlined above, it is proposed that as a general rule AF Members should be invited to contribute to the risk assessment process at its inception, after information of the Forum of the starting time of the assessment (which may occur sometime after the definition of the working programme). This would involve their notification of the question, a request for relevant information and identification of appropriate experts.

50. For sensitive matters, it should be made possible for concerned AF Members to get information on the evolution of the assessment (through a consultation procedure considering different possible approaches on a case by case, involving the AF and insuring strict respect of confidentiality). In a limited number of cases e.g. aspartame there is a need to inform AF Members about the progress in the preparation of an opinion but not about the content of the discussions.
It is also possible that scientific panels decide during the process to organise a meeting with experts or a hearing with all stakeholders, in order to inform them on the progress and for themselves to be sure to have access to all data available.

51. Finally, AF Members should continue to be informed about the conclusion of the risk assessment prior to publication of the opinion. The Working Group recommended the extension of this approach to opinions prepared by National Authorities.

CHAPTER IV

WAYS TO EXCHANGE SCIENTIFIC INFORMATION

Introduction

52. The Working Group considered a number of approaches by which scientific information could be and are currently shared.

Through scientific experts

53. It was recognised that where an expert participates in an EFSA panel as well as in a similar national body, the expert should be able to share knowledge obtained in both these *fora*. Indeed if they did not share the scientific information, all work in the Scientific Committee/Panels would be less relevant. Although a lot of the documents presented to the Panels are confidential and cannot be made public, the conclusions and inferences drawn from them may be shared provided these could not be attributed to any individual. The Working Group acknowledged the professional integrity of scientists on the Panels.

54. The Working Group thought that the confidentiality rules as applied in EFSA would be comparable with those for the staff of National Authorities in Member States, hence information could easily be exchanged without fear of disclosure. However this might not apply where the confidentiality rules in research institutes differ from those of staff of National Authorities. It was also recognised that for certain assessments commercially sensitive information was available to the Panels in confidence and this should not be made available.

55. The Working Group suggested that these points should be reflected in a *modified* confidentiality undertaking, in order to make it less complicated for experts and panel secretariats to exchange scientific information.

Through Panel secretariats

56. Contacts and exchange of information are progressively developing between scientific staff of EFSA and National Authorities and institutes in MS working on the same merit as EFSA. These contacts are especially helpful when both groups are involved in similar activities (e.g. scientific co-ordination of panels).

57. The Working Group thought that such cooperation should be encouraged as it is an important component of EFSA scientific management policy to develop networking with National Authorities. The Advisory Forum could play an important role in stimulating these and the WG emphasised that the AF Members should stay informed regarding developments on these networks.
The Working Group also thought that Members of the Advisory Forum should be contacted as a coordinated entry point when these networks had to be started.

By use of electronic means

58. The Working Group noted that electronic means of communication (Extranet and Videoconference) were being developed as a tool for Advisory Forum members, EFSA staff, Panel members and other scientists to exchange (scientific) information and documents. Meetings via Videoconference facilities can replace physical gatherings. This could be required in times of emergencies when members do not have time to travel, when members just need to be updated on a certain topic and in general it can decrease the travel burden significantly.

59. EFSA's current efforts on creating an Extranet were strongly supported by the Working Group. It should be further developed in consultation with the AF. This Extranet would allow dedicated domains for user groups and subjects with access rights controlled via password, by which scientific documents which are not (yet) in the public domain can be exchanged between AF members and related scientists and discussion groups can be set up. The Working Group noted that the bureaucracy associated with this tool should be minimised but consistent with controls and standards to achieve a balance between uploading and censorship.

By inviting scientific experts to (parts of) scientific meetings

60. In paragraph 53 & 54 the possibility of experts participating in scientific panels at EFSA and concurrently at national level has been discussed. However, experts could also be *invited* to attend one of these meetings, either as participant or as observer. The aims of this are twofold: either these experts can inform the panel of additional information which may take forward the deliberations and/or the expert gets acquainted which information they could use 'at home'.

61. The Working Group agreed that this 'exchange' of EFSA- and National Experts working on the same issue, could make a valuable contribution. It had previously noted the potential contribution for work in EFSA of experts identified by AF Members on specific topics. Obviously these invited experts should be subject to the same confidentiality rules as the permanent members (see paragraph 53 & 54).

62. In order that the operations in the scientific panels remain controlled, the Working Group members suggest that external scientists should participate in a meeting by invitation only. The Working Group recognised that the Panel and its Secretariat should retain discretion in inviting participants. Additionally, scientific committees, panels and working groups already have the possibility of organising broader hearings to seek additional information, alternative views and consult interested parties. It also were to be noted that scientific groups often invite the relevant risk manager to a) explain the question asked and b) get scientific background to support future measures. It was recognised that the Commission is already invited to Panel meetings and that Panel Members found this dialogue with risk managers very useful.

63. The Working Group discussed whether scientific meetings should be made open to other participants than fellow scientists, but concluded this was not part of the remit of this working group.

By setting up ad hoc Liaison Groups with AF members and/or their representatives

64. The Working Group has pointed out in Chapter II the moment at which possible exchange of scientific information could be useful and concluded that especially a contribution at the inception of a Risk Assessment process could be very useful.

65. In chapter III the group clarifies that contribution amongst others could exist in the delivery of unpublished national data. Chapter IV is recommending the exchange of scientific information between scientists and amongst panel secretariats, but it still might be the case that these network do not cover all the possibilities.

66. Therefore, the Working Group suggests the possibility to establish *ad hoc* Liaison groups from EFSA and interested Member States for specific risk assessments, in particular to ensure that (unpublished) data will be transferred from the national level to EFSA. This would also provide information on data quality, methods used, language, etc. to facilitate the performance and completion of the risk assessment process. This SCOOP alike working group (see Chapter I.c, third bullet) should be managed by the institute(s) who will conduct the risk assessment.

Conclusions

67. To modify the confidentiality undertaking in order to give experts participating in EFSA and national panels, the possibility to exchange certain information under the conditions as set out.

68. Contacts and exchange of information are progressively developing between scientific staff of EFSA and scientific panels at national level. Such co-operation and networking with national authorities represents an important component of EFSA scientific management policy. Its development therefore should be encouraged by the AF, especially when both groups are involved in similar activities.

69. There should be further development of the Extranet and Videoconferences in consultation with the AF which will facilitate the exchange of (scientific) data and information. EFSA will establish an Extranet containing both documents and a searchable database of experts. This Extranet is designed to support the activities of the EFSA Advisory forum, the Scientific Committee and the Panels. It will be constructed for the exchange of information that is not (yet) in the public domain, but is not strictly confidential. Confidential information should not be shared beyond a limited number of authorised users and information that can be made public is placed on the EFSA internet website.

70. To continue and broaden the procedure of inviting fellow scientists working at the same issue, for scientific meetings at EFSA and national level.

71. The Working Group recommended that a more formalised approach for interaction with Advisory Forum members at the start of the risk assessment process would be developed. This should include seeking relevant national data and identification of national experts who could contribute to the Panel during the development of the opinion. Which may require the creation of ad hoc liaison groups between AF Members on risk assessments which are about to be started.
The Working Group endorsed the need for integrity and independence of the EFSA risk assessment process and considered that this can be ensured by identifying the contribution of these experts in opinions adopted by the Panels.

CHAPTER V

RECOMMENDATIONS TO EFSA AND TO THE MEMBERS OF THE ADVISORY FORUM

72. Continue developing the relationship between EFSA and the AF (and via them the national institutions) and do this as appropriate via more formalised channels of communication.

73. For EFSA and AF Members to mutually inform the other on the starting time of a risk assessment and for EFSA to invite AF Members to contribute to the risk assessment process by way of notification of a new question, requesting for relevant information and identification of appropriate experts.

74. Where appropriate and on request, share amongst AF Members and EFSA both published and unpublished data that would be useful for risk assessments considered by other Member States or EFSA. As regards unpublished data, exchange also uncertainties, if possible, with respect to the absence of peer reviews and/or the data quality and validity.

75. Maintain the status quo as regards the sharing and publication of agendas and minutes of meetings of scientific Panels and (ad hoc) Working Groups.

76. Exchange working programmes of EFSA and of risk assessments at national level and update these regularly through the AF.

77. Consider the creation of ad hoc liaison groups, as needed, between AF Members focused on risk assessments which are about to be started, in order to seek relevant national data and identification of national experts who could contribute to the work of the Panel.

78. Create the possibility for concerned AF Members to be kept closely informed on request on the details of progress of risk assessments in EFSA and in MS. This information should be open for other interested AF Members as well.

79. Give scientific panels the possibility to propose during the process to organise a meeting with experts or a hearing with all stakeholders, in order to inform them on the progress and for themselves to be sure to have access to all data available.

80. Establish procedures to share under embargo, as appropriate, particular opinions of importance for Member States and/or EFSA prior to their publication. This holds true for opinions developed by EFSA and at national level and would provide AF Members and EFSA with the opportunity to be prepared for questions which may arise and to discuss and fine-tune accompanying press material.

81. Give experts, participating in EFSA and in national panels, and panel secretariats the possibility to exchange certain information.

82. Encourage contacts and exchange of information between scientific staff of EFSA and of scientific panels at national level.

83. Continue the development of the Extranet and Videoconferences in consultation with the AF, in order to further facilitate the exchange of (scientific) data and information and to avoid physical meetings thus achieving savings when possible.

Annex I: Members of the *ad hoc* Advisory Forum Working Group (INA-AFWG)

Herman Koëter (Chair), European Food Safety Authority

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Jan Bloemendal, European Food Safety Authority

Charles Crémer, Belgian Federal Public Service for Public Health, Food Chain Safety and Environment

Dirk Detken, European Food Safety Authority

Tito Fernandes, Faculdade de Medicina Veterinária-UTL, Lisboa, Portugal

Beate Folgerø, Norwegian Scientific Committee for Food Safety

Irene van Geest, European Food Safety Authority

Anders Glynn, Swedish National Food Administration (NFA)

David Gott, Food Standards Agency, UK

Roland Grossgut, Austrian Agency for Health and Food Safety (AGES)

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Bo Jansson, Stockholm University, Sweden

Hans Peter Jensen, Danish Institute of Food and Veterinary Research (DFVF)

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Annex II: Abbreviations

AF	Advisory Forum
INA-AFWG	*ad hoc* Advisory Forum Working Group on the Input of National Authorities into the work of EFSA's Scientific Committee, Panels and other Expert Groups
EFSA	European Food Safety Authority
EU	European Union
MS	Member State(s)
RA	Risk Assessment
SC	Scientific Committee
WG	Working Group