



European Food Safety Authority

ADVISORY FORUM

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STRATEGY FOR COOPERATION AND NETWORKING BETWEEN THE EU MEMBER STATES AND EFSA

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**STRATEGY
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I. INTRODUCTION

1. A key task for EFSA, and EU Member States, is the development and communication of high quality scientific opinions, which are recognized as truly authoritative both within the EU and in the wider international arena. These opinions need to be based on sound science involving Europe's leading experts in regulatory risk assessment. The development of such opinions can be resource intensive. Careful consideration needs to be given to the question of how the expertise available to EFSA and within the Member States can be best utilised. Member States currently have a variety of mechanisms for obtaining scientific advice. For example some, but not all, Member States have their own scientific advisory committees.
2. EFSA and the EU Member States are also committed to providing timely and effective response and advice on risks associated with the food chain, to all interested parties and the public at large. The establishment of an effective communications network will strengthen coherence of risk communications in the EU, and thereby contribute to building consumer confidence in the risk assessment process.
3. In June 2006, EFSA's Management Board recommended the development of greater cooperation and networking between EFSA and its counterparts in the Member States as a key priority over the next five years. They envisage this network of EFSA with the national authorities to be in a position to mobilise pan-European scientific resources towards the establishment of a network of scientific excellence, enabling all partners to maintain/further strengthen their system, both in terms of national activities and their contribution to European activities. Only through close collaboration on scientific activities, through greater dialogue and effective communication and through shared activities the network will be able to enhance the sense of common ownership of its activities and output. Through sharing best practices with the scientific organisations and institutes across Europe, EFSA and the national food authorities will be able to continue to develop their reputation and their standards of scientific excellence.
4. There are already several examples of cooperation between Member States. These include: the assessment of recent data on aspartame; the collection of occurrence data on methyl mercury, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) and furan; consultation on quantitative microbiological risk assessment at Community level¹; collection of risk assessment studies on *Salmonella* in meat and the annual collection of data on

¹http://www.efsa.europa.eu/etc/medialib/efsa/advisory_forum/adv_meetings/1375_Par.0011_File_dat/af_noteqmra_16thmeet_en_3a1.pdf

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zoonoses, antimicrobial resistance and food-borne outbreaks. In addition for BSE risk assessment there is an existing network with Member States facilitating collection of data. The strategy as laid out in this paper seeks to further strengthen the existing arrangements and move towards even closer cooperation on scientific and communication activities, through greater dialogue and shared activities to enhance the sense of common ownership of these activities and outputs.

5. Cooperation will only be successful if there are clear mutual benefits. The main benefits anticipated from cooperation include sharing the burden of regulatory risk assessments, easy access to expertise not available at home and, in general, making the most efficient use of sparse national resources. These benefits will only be fully realised once there is knowledge on and confidence in scientific assessments carried out elsewhere. Therefore, building such confidence is the most important target milestone to achieve the Strategy objectives set out above.
6. In autumn 2006 the Advisory Forum (AF) established a Working Group on Cooperation and Networking (WG). The Working Group met on 31 October to develop a strategy for cooperation and networking. The WG took into account the report of the AF Working Group on the Exchange of Scientific Information issued in May 2006 and the Declaration of Intent signed by the AF Members subsequently. The WG also took note of the two strategic documents discussed at the Advisory Forum meeting in Berne in September 2006: Doc AF 29.09.2006 – 4, Previous and current scientific cooperation with Member States and Doc AF 29.09.2006 – 5, Background on the legal tools for funding scientific cooperation with Member States.
7. At their meeting on 6 and 7 November 2006, the Scientific Committee discussed the issue on the basis of a paper prepared before by an ad hoc Working Group of the Scientific Committee (SC). The SC endorsed the need for further strengthening cooperation and networking with the MS and their recommendations are included in this document. The SC also identified a number of specific objectives and main areas of cooperation – Annex I.
8. The initiatives deriving from this Strategy will be implemented in full respect of the responsibilities and roles attributed to EFSA by its founding Regulation. They are especially without prejudice to specific procedures applicable to requests for opinions referred to the Authority which are laid down in Community legislation governing the scientific evaluation of substances, or products subject to a system of prior authorisation or entry in a positive list.

**II. STRATEGY OBJECTIVES: WORKING TOWARDS A COMMON
APPROACH FOR EUROPEAN RISK ASSESSMENTS**

9. This document contains the framework for cooperation and networking between the EU Member States and EFSA in order to achieve European opinions – in the fields of

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food and feed safety; nutrition; animal health and welfare, plant health and plant protection – of high quality, recognized as pan-European opinions based on sound science. A properly functioning network between the EU Member States and EFSA also increases the effectiveness and efficiency as well as the awareness of EU risk assessments in Europe and beyond.

10. A *target of ten years* should be set to the establishment of a common approach of risk assessments throughout Europe in order to reinforce both the credibility and coherence of scientific opinions and to continually improve the quality of scientific advice of EFSA and the national authorities
11. This approach will help build greater confidence in the advice available to the European Commission, Member States and food businesses to help them to make appropriate, proportionate and timely risk management decisions. It will also provide the opportunity for more consistency in risk management decision making across Europe based on the best advice being available to all.
12. Moreover, the benefits apply also to those who do risk communication - both risk managers and risk assessors. Greater credibility for risk assessments and increased cooperation are likely to lead to more consistent communication and clearer messages on food safety based on a common approach.

III. PRIORITY AREAS FOR STRENGTHENING THE COOPERATION AND NETWORKING

13. The strategy recognises four priority areas for the establishment of a common approach of risk assessments and communication outputs throughout Europe. These *priority areas* are: a) creating European databases by exchanging and collecting scientific data and information, b) sharing best risk assessment practices, c) developing harmonized methodologies for risk assessment and d) promoting coherence in risk communication. Improving the involvement of the new and acceding Member States in these activities represents an important element of this strategy.

III.a Exchanging and collecting scientific data and information

14. In order to achieve effective scientific cooperation it is essential to establish efficient systems for the active exchange of information between Member States and EFSA. EFSA will collect all relevant data, analyses and store these in European databases accessible for the National Authorities in the Member States. These systems will facilitate the effective participation of Member States in EFSA's activities and also provide adequate information to EFSA in relation to activities undertaken in Member States.

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15. In September 2006 Members of the EFSA Advisory Forum signed a declaration of intent² on enhancing the exchange of scientific information amongst themselves and EFSA. The task of developing an implementation plan for the commitments in the declaration has been assigned to the Advisory Forum Working Group for the Exchange of Scientific Information. The work of this group will be integrated with that on scientific cooperation and networking.
16. As already identified by the Management Board, EFSA will give the highest priority and appropriate resources to developing the practical infrastructure necessary for the greater involvement of the Member States. In particular the EFSA Extranet, which facilitates exchanges of scientific and communications information, will be further developed into a fully functioning and active tool.

III.b *Sharing best risk assessment practices*

17. In order to share best risk assessment practices and to stimulate collaboration between groups of Member States, the Advisory Forum has identified a list of potential pilot projects – see Annex II. Preferably, these projects should also involve a large, small and new or accession Member State. Consideration should also be given to building on existing examples of successful cooperation. These activities will also help raise the profile of EFSA and its network with national authorities within the Member States.
18. To bring the standard of risk assessments up to a common level in all Member States, EFSA will establish a programme of courses in risk assessment, involving experts from Member States by the end of 2007. However, this will not provide a quick mechanism for transferring knowledge based on accumulated experience. Therefore such courses will be supplemented, from 2007, by a programme of study tours, between Member States, involving both senior managers and staff directly involved in risk assessment. In particular, the involvement of the ‘new’ MS will actively be sought. The aim of both initiatives would be to share experience between Member States and contribute to an increased level of mutual trust. The involvement of less experienced experts as observers in the work of the Panels also provides a mechanism for knowledge transfer from existing panel members.
19. To enable opinions to be developed rapidly, in response to urgent issues, EFSA is recommended to establish a database of national experts, by mid 2007, who could be called upon to participate in the work of the SC and Scientific Panels.

² Declaration of intent of members of the EFSA Advisory Forum concerning enhancement of the exchange of scientific information amongst the Advisory Forum Members and EFSA.

http://www.efsa.europa.eu/etc/medialib/efsa/advisory_forum/declaration_of_intent.Par.0001.File.dat/af_declaration_intent_18thmeet_signed.pdf

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III.c Developing harmonized methodologies for risk assessment

20. Risk assessments require several steps to be followed and aspects to be taken into account. Harmonising risk assessment methodologies in Europe will contribute to an enhanced level of confidence and ultimately the common use of risk assessment methodologies across Europe.
21. It is within EFSA's remit to stimulate, coordinate and define harmonised risk assessment methodologies and approaches and to set priorities for the preparatory activities concerned. A number of inter-related projects are outlined in Annex II.

III.d Promoting coherence in risk communications

22. Co-operation in risk communications will continue to be facilitated by the Advisory Forum and its Working Group on Communications. The Advisory Forum Working Group on Communications, established in November 2003, has developed incrementally into a strong network of all communications units joining EFSA, the European Commission and Member States. This forum provides an important mechanism for exchange of information and experiences and is a basis for the co-ordination of communications activities between the national authorities and EFSA.
23. The Advisory Forum and its Working Group on Communications will seek to build on the working practices established thus far to foster co-operation in risk communications. These include:
 - Early warning on emerging and topical communications issues;
 - Pre-notification of press releases, sent under embargo to Members prior to dissemination by EFSA, in order to inform the network, seek input and help Members prepare for and further support communications at national level;
 - Evaluation of communications activities and results (case study approach) in order to identify lessons learned and develop best practices;
 - Organisation of workshops and training sessions to raise knowledge and share experiences on risk perception and communications.

Through such dialogue and collaboration, coherence in message development and delivery in the EU is enhanced.

24. In order to further strengthen co-ordination and coherence of communications, it is recommended to:
 - Engage in 2-way exchange of communications materials, including pre-notification of press releases issued by Member States
 - Develop a common approach for assessing and monitoring public perception on food safety and nutrition in the EU
 - Better support key actors and information multipliers in Member States in order to reach consumers with messages adapted to their needs and concerns
 - Develop strategies and guidance documents on sensitive communications issues.

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25. Initial work has already been undertaken by a task force on Collaboration in Communications established by the Advisory Forum Working Group on Communications in 2006. The task force has identified a range of communications activities which will be further developed by the end of 2007. These include facilitating greater two-way exchange between members of communications issues, activities and materials. The Working Group is also considering a range of activities mainly focusing on strengthening collaboration between EFSA and the Member States, including the possible organisation of joint communications initiatives. An overview of the activities currently under consideration is presented in Annex III.

IV. STRENGTHENING MS' COOPERATION THROUGH THE ADVISORY FORUM IN COLLABORATION WITH THE SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE

26. In accordance with EU Regulation 178/2002, the Advisory Forum will assist the Executive Director to implement this Strategy by:

- Becoming 'Focal Points' in the MS as regards the national networks composed of risk managers, national authorities, research institutes, stakeholders and consumers in the field of risk assessments on food and feed safety; animal and plant health; animal welfare and nutrition. The network of focal points will be responsible for the organisation and co-ordination of risk assessment institutes in Europe and will be closely involved in the preparation and implementation of the Authority's and national authorities Work Programmes. The focal points keep EFSA and the other AF Members informed of developments as regards risk assessments and science in their countries as well as on communications within the areas of the AF's responsibility.
- Considering EFSA's and the National Authorities' Working Programmes (short, medium and long term) for priority setting and in order to identify joint working activities. The network of focal points also discusses possible resources to be utilized and explores the co-financing of organisations operating in the fields of EFSA's mission according to Article 36³ of EU Regulation 178/2002.
- With respect to emerging risks and urgent situations, particularly attention will be given to preparing and facilitating the network of risk assessment bodies and institutes which have to deal with these ...

³ This strategy covers the complete framework for cooperation and networking between the EU Member States and EFSA. It is in line with the specific tools foreseen in the legislation for cooperation especially Article 36 of Regulation 178/2002 and its implementing act Regulation 2230/2204. These will form part and complement this broader strategy when implementing its initiatives

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- Collaborating with EFSA's Scientific Committee and the Scientific Panels, where appropriate, in order to:
 - steer Advisory Forum Working Groups on the harmonisation of risk assessment methods possibly leading to 'good risk assessment practices', and enabling EFSA and the national authorities to exchange data, studies and assessments by avoiding redoing these;
 - steer Advisory Forum Working Groups on projects identified in MS and conducted in collaboration with EFSA and national authorities with the aim of preparing scientific reports for consideration by the Scientific Committee or Panels concerned; and:
 - manage and facilitate ad hoc liaison groups between EFSA's scientific secretariat and secretariats of the scientific advisory committees/bodies in the Member State(s) dealing with the same subjects. Through these liaison groups, information, relevant data, etc. can be exchanged and AF Members can be updated on progress of relevant risk assessments.
 - Raising the profile of risk assessment institutes in the EU in order to make their working practices and products better known as well as the collaborative manner in which these have been obtained.
27. The Scientific Committee will be consulted in the definition and priority setting of possible projects for scientific cooperation between EFSA and the Member States. In addition, the Scientific Committee and Panels may initiate work and seek Member States' involvement for cooperative tasks such as the collection and analysis of relevant scientific and technical data for a future risk assessment. In order to ensure continued support, the Scientific Committee will regularly discuss the progress of ongoing scientific cooperation programmes.
28. Once the projects have been completed and the reports and recommendations from the Advisory Forum Working Groups have been discussed and endorsed by the Advisory Forum, they may be sent to the Scientific Committee, or appropriate Panel(s), to assist them in the development of an opinion, statement or guidance.

V. CONCLUSIONS

29. Strengthening cooperation and networking between Member States and EFSA will enhance coherence in risk assessment and communications. This in turn will contribute to increased consumer protection and ultimately, help to build consumer confidence in the EU food safety system.
30. Implementation of the Strategy for Cooperation and Networking between the EU Member States and EFSA will secure tangible benefits for the Community including:

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- Enhancement of the quality, coherence and effectiveness of European risk assessment through the development of common approaches and collective leverage of information, expertise and resources.
- Stronger contribution and support of risk assessors to risk managers in the decision making process, both at national and European level.
- A more efficient risk assessment system allowing a better distribution of work, further sharing of regulatory risk assessments, easier access to expertise not available at home and, in general, the most effective use of sparse and finite resources.
- The development and dissemination of timely, relevant and consistent risk communications messages tailored to address the needs and expectations of key audiences across the EU.

31. Four priority areas have been identified to enhance the cooperation and networking between the MS and EFSA:
- a. Exchanging and collecting scientific data and information;
 - b. Sharing best risk assessments practices;
 - c. Developing harmonized methodologies for risk assessments and
 - d. Promoting coherence in risk communications.
32. Advisory Forum members will become EFSA's 'focal points' in the Member States as regards the national networks composed of risk managers, national authorities, research institutes, consumers and other stakeholders in the field of risk assessments on food and feed safety; nutrition; animal health and welfare; plant health and plant protection. The network of focal points will be responsible for the organisation and co-ordination of risk assessment institutes in Europe and will be closely involved in the preparation and implementation of the Authority's and national authorities Work Programmes.
33. The Advisory Forum has already identified a number of projects as part of further strengthening the cooperation and networking between the Member States and EFSA. The Scientific Committee and/or Panels will be consulted in the definition and priority setting of these projects and may endorse and adopt the final results. Moreover, Scientific Committee and/or Panel experts may participate in the Advisory Forum working groups executing these projects. Closer working relations will be required between EFSA's Scientific Committee and Panels and the risk assessment bodies and committees in the Member States, however, the separation of roles, responsibilities and independency will be safeguarded.
34. The Advisory Forum Working Group on Communications will further strengthen its collaboration, seeking to facilitate greater two-way exchange and co-ordination of communications, including the organization of joint activities in areas of mutual interest.

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35. This Strategy will be presented to the Management Board for endorsement. Afterwards it will be circulated and presented to EU Institutions, EU and national stakeholders and international organisations. The Strategy will be reviewed within two years.

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ANNEX I

Specific objectives and main areas of cooperation identified by the Scientific Committee

The SC has identified a number of specific objectives for scientific cooperation as follows:

- Preparation of scientific documents in the framework of risk assessments (for authorisations in particular) to be carried out by the relevant Scientific Panels and Scientific Committee of EFSA;
- EU-wide collection and analysis of scientific data in the framework of (preparation of, follow-up of) a risk assessment and sharing data of common interest, e.g. in order to establish specific databases;
- Dissemination of best practice and improvement of methods of collecting and analysing scientific and technical data, particularly for the purposes of facilitating comparability and producing a Community-level summary;
- Collection and analysis of specific data in response to a common priority, in particular the Community priorities contained in the Authority's work programmes, and in cases where the Authority's scientific assistance is urgently needed by the Commission, especially in the context of the general plan for crisis management referred to in Article 55 of Regulation (EC) No 178/2002;
- Development of harmonised risk assessment methods, of new test methodologies and of specific models (e.g. for environmental fate) or tools to carry out specific analyses;
- Development of short-term and medium-term joint work plans to carry out scientific activities on specific subjects to fill relevant gaps or reduce uncertainties in risk assessment.
- Networking to identify and respond to emerging risks to food and feed;
- Development of rapid responses to urgent (ad-hoc) questions other than emerging risks;
- Networking to identify and possibly prevent the emergence of divergent opinions, particularly for pending mandates, and to take action to clarify the underlying motivations;
- Establishment of efficient monitoring systems in order to identify any new information which may have an impact on previous EFSA's opinions;
- Establishment of agreements to ensure that EFSA, when needed, has access to testing facilities in Member States; and
- Establishment of a European roster of experts in different sectors which could be called upon to participate, in case of need and at short notice, in the work of the Panels and the Scientific Committee.

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ANNEX II

Potential specific projects identified by the AF Working Group on Cooperation and Networking

- Morphine exposure through consumption of poppy seeds
- Food fortification with folic acid - risks and benefits
- Blue tongue
- Horizon scanning to identify and manage emerging risks
- Horizon scanning to monitor and avoid re-emerging risks
- Detection methods for relevant marine biotoxins
- Nanoparticles – development of necessary risk assessment approaches and risk perception
- Quantitative microbiological risk assessment on biological hazards (e.g. Campylobacter)
- Active/intelligent packaging
- Food supplements/pharmaceuticals

Programme of activities to increase harmonisation of risk assessment within the EU developed by the AF Working Group on Cooperation and Networking

Collection of existing risk assessment guidance from Member States	by end 2007
Collect existing material	by April 2007
Organise workshop	by July 2007
Produce report	by Dec. 2007

Harmonising the collection and analysis of chemical occurrence data **by end 2008**

Harmonising the methodologies for collection and analysis of microbiological occurrence data **by end 2008**

Harmonising QMRA methodologies and development of consensus models at Community level **by ??**

Developing a comprehensive EU consumption database to include vulnerable groups such as children	by end 2010
Establish database	by end 2007
Populate database	

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Establishing harmonised exposure assessment approaches	by end 2010
Establish inventory of exposure assessment scenarios	by end 2007
Evaluate exposure assessment scenarios	
Develop optimal exposure assessment approaches using quality data from consumption database	by end 2010

Harmonising approaches for hazard characterisation and assessment by end 2009

By:

- Developing procedures for assessing nanomaterials,
 - Developing procedures for assessing macromolecules
 - Developing procedures for environmental assessments of GMOs
-

Harmonising approaches for risk characterisation and assessment by end 2012

By:

- Developing pilot studies for comparing and analysing assessments based on real examples
 - Testing convergence of risk assessment through ring test based on pilot studies using real data submissions
 - Workshop to identify differences of opinion and refine approach **by mid 2014**
 - Further testing **by mid 2015**
-

Agreeing common approaches of risk assessments on food and feed safety EU wide by end 2015

As a result of the projects above, to establish and implement mechanisms for ensuring single, high quality, scientific European opinion, produced on any one topic. by 2016

General Remark

A number of countries have already shown interest to participate to one of the projects. Others are very much welcome to join as well.

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ANNEX III

Communications initiatives already under consideration

Joint event in Member States

In co-operation with the national food safety authorities (or their equivalent) EFSA proposes to support the organisation of information seminars, for experts, stakeholders and the national media, on topical issues, such as Health and Nutrition claims.

Joint media event in Member States

The above-mentioned seminar could be accompanied by a media event, for instance

- an informal Media Breakfast or lunch, of EFSA's Executive Director or Science Director and the Director of the national authority with a selection of specialised media;
- a formal Press Briefing by EFSA and the national authority;
- a double interview, EFSA's Executive Director or Science Director and Director of national authority with leading newspaper/specialised media

Sharing web content

The translation of the Declaration of Intent into all Member States languages is a first step in accommodating the information on scientific cooperation issues. EFSA proposes to organise a special workshop, with web managers/editors and communication advisors of all national authorities, to work out which content/texts of EFSA's web information could be of interest for publication in Member States (to be published in their languages on their websites); possibly in conjunction with EFSA's project concerning the redesign of its website.

Joint publication on-line

With a (digital) newsletter on issues related to cooperation and networking, the information can be brought to the attention to all parties interested, not only the national authorities, but also experts/scientists and stakeholders. Three editors, two from the Member States and one from EFSA, would be responsible for publishing, three times a year, such a newsletter with the input of all members.

Joint publication off-line

A small brochure or leaflet on EFSA's Advisory Forum network in the EU, mentioning the key points of risk assessment and scientific networking, with a list of all national authorities, could be a useful handout for national and international meetings and conferences. Three editors, two from the Member States and one from EFSA, would be responsible for drafting and producing such a brochure.

Visual identity of the network

A specific visual identity for all publications, online and offline, on cooperation and networking initiated by EFSA's Advisory Forum will enhance the visibility of all joint activities.

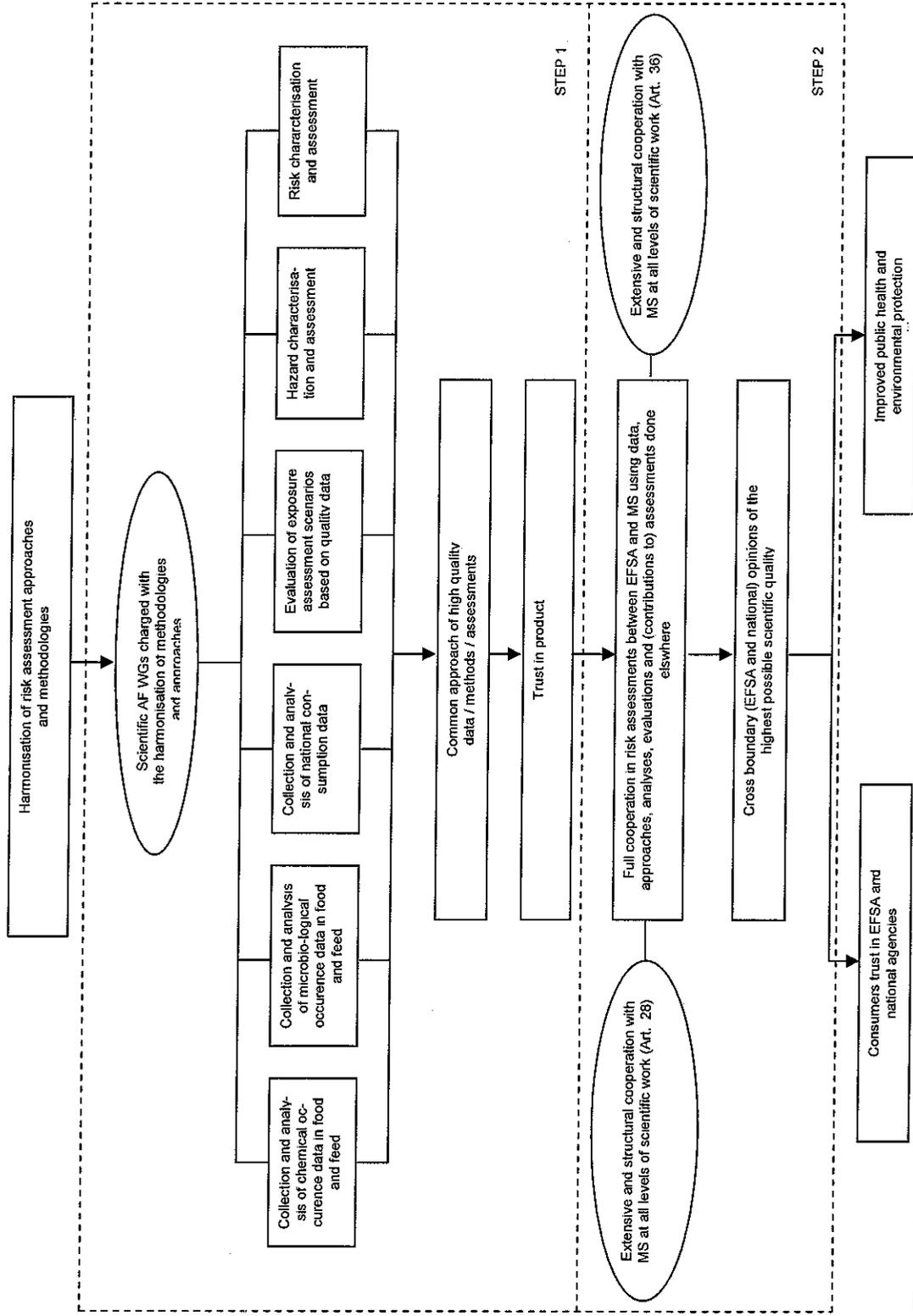


Figure 1. Steps towards achieving harmonised risk assessments of the highest quality

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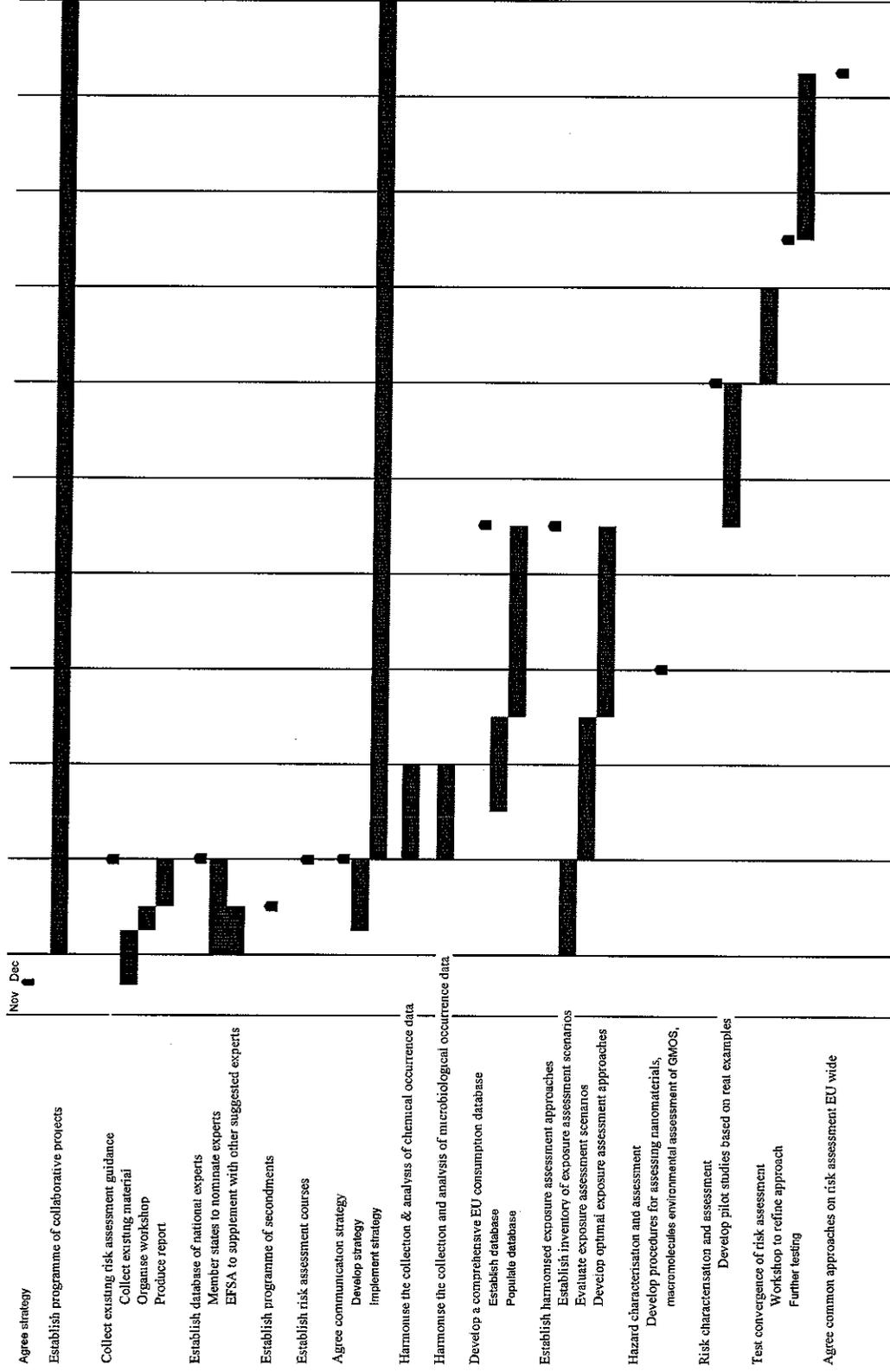


Figure 2. Proposed activities and timescales for achieving harmonised risk assessments of the highest quality