



European Food Safety Authority

Draft Minutes

ADVISORY FORUM WORKING GROUP ON COMMUNICATIONS

FIRST MEETING

24 NOVEMBER 2003

Members of the Advisory Forum Working Group on Communications

Chair: Anne-Laure Gassin, Communications Director, EFSA

Present: Dr Roland Grossgut, Austria
Hubert Erhart, Austria
Pascal Houbaert, Belgium
Charlotte Bendez, Denmark
Marja Pohjanpalo, Finland
Juliette Chevalier, France
Burckhard Viell, Germany
Georgia Grintzali, Greece
Edel Conway, Ireland
Dr Massimo Aquili, Italy
Patrick Hau, Luxembourg
Irène Van Geest, Netherlands
Fátima Medina, Portugal
Dr Héctor Alonso, Spain
Jerker Sörenson, Sweden
Neil Martinson, UK

Observers: Kamila Fiedlerova, Czech Republic
Béate Gminder, EU Commission

Apologies: Sylwia Osmak, Poland Kristin Faerden, Norway

European Food Safety Authority: Executive Director and Staff

Geoffrey Podger, EFSA	Helen Kinghan, EFSA
Ingela Soderlund, EFSA	Andrew Stimpson, EFSA

1. Introduction and Adoption of Agenda

1.1. The meeting was opened by Ms Anne-Laure Gassin, EFSA Director of Communications, and chairperson for the working group. She welcomed the members to the first meeting of the group and asked for comments on the draft agenda. The agenda was adopted without modification.

2. Introduction of Members

2.1. As it was the first meeting, a 'tour de table' was suggested so that each of the participants could introduce him/herself.

3. Role, Future Perspectives and Risk Communication Objectives

3.1. Mr Geoffrey Podger, Executive Director of EFSA, provided the group with an overview of EFSA's role, its goals in the areas of risk assessment and communications, and future perspectives. He noted that, while his presentation was of a general nature, he would pay special attention to issues of interest to the Communications working group. The content of the presentation is described in the Powerpoint presentation at *Annex A*.

3.2. With respect to EFSA in general, Mr Podger made a number of significant remarks. For example, he noted that self tasking was an important capability for EFSA, as this would allow it to identify key issues which were not the subject of questions from the Commission, Parliament or Member States at a given time. He also noted that neither the Parliament nor the Member States had exercised their right to refer questions to EFSA as yet, but that he thought this situation was likely to change.

3.3. In specific reference to the risk communication task, Mr Podger stated that, although EFSA was legally obliged to communicate directly with consumers, the majority of such communications would continue to be undertaken by the national food safety authorities. He stressed that EFSA's role was to provide advice to the public relative to risk assessments undertaken by its scientific panels but that EFSA would in no way supplant the work of national authorities in this area. The Authority will continue to use its website as the principal communications tool and source of information to the public.

3.4. He went on to describe the main communications initiatives taken to date, including the development of media relations and of the website, and the organisation of a seminar for stakeholders in Ostend. The Authority is in the process of creating an EU network which would comprise the main stakeholders with a key interest in food safety. Resources in these areas were to be expanded in line with the growing requirements.

3.5. He stressed that EFSA, together with its Advisory Forum, sits at the heart of a European food safety communications network. Consequently, it is essential that, as far as possible, communications are done in an integrated way by EFSA and the Member State authorities. It is important that information is shared extensively, and that Member

States provide input to risk assessment and risk communications in advance of EFSA announcements. EFSA will also ensure that Member State authorities receive draft opinions and press materials around two days prior to going public on any significant issue. However, it should be made clear that sharing of such information should in no way compromise the independence of EFSA's scientific panels or their working groups.

3.6. The group debated the important issue of the borderline between risk assessment and risk management.

- Geoffrey Podger reiterated EFSA's role in providing advice to the public in association with the announcement of its risk assessments. He stated that while it is possible to separate risk assessment from risk management, communications requires an integrated approach, particularly when the product concerned is already on the market. While respecting everyone's roles, including that of national authorities, it was important for EFSA to provide answers to the recipients of messages regarding risk assessments. EFSA's role is to provide core messages regarding food safety issues, to be then adapted and contextualised by national authorities. The representative from the European Commission endorsed EFSA's role in providing independent, objective advice to the public.
- The UK stressed the importance of adapting messages to meet the needs of national audiences. For instance, the UK FSA conducted focus groups among caretakers in order to evaluate the acceptability of messages relative to semicarbazide and assess possible consumer reaction. Geoffrey Podger confirmed that while advice to individuals tends to come from the risk assessors themselves, such messages indeed should be adapted by countries in order to address local issues and communicate in a way which is culturally sensitive. For instance regarding the semicarbazide issue, both the UK and Greece chose to highlight the importance of consumer choice and suggested alternatives to that of baby foods packed in glass jars.
- France asked for clarification regarding the role of national authorities in risk communications vs that of EFSA. France also specified that it was difficult to put EFSA risk communications into context when one has not participated in the analysis itself. Geoffrey Podger reiterated that it was important for both national authorities and EFSA to share information upfront, ie in advance of announcement of EFSA opinions.

4. EFSA Communications Action Plan (2004)

4.1. A-L Gassin then gave a presentation of EFSA's 2004 Communications Action Plan (*see Annex B*). She stated the purpose as being 'to rebuild the confidence of European consumers in food safety evaluation through appropriate, consistent and accurate communications on food safety issues, based on the Authority's risk assessments and scientific expertise.' She said that EFSA communications activities are still in their early stages although a key foundation had already been established through the EFSA

web site and media announcements relative to EFSA opinions. Ongoing dialogue with Member States through the Advisory Forum and outreach to stakeholders have also been initiated. The challenge for 2004 is to develop a clear communications strategy to support the Authority's overall goals as outlined in the draft plan submitted to EFSA's Management Board.

4.2. A-L Gassin then sought the views and comments of members regarding EFSA's communications plan for 2004. Overall, members endorsed EFSA's approach and also stressed the importance of collaboration between EFSA and national authorities in order to ensure consistent communications to the public.

- Germany questioned whether the image of EFSA would be meaningful to the general public and stressed the importance of collaboration with national agencies.
- Denmark asked for clarification regarding EFSA's main target groups and whether EFSA indeed intended to reach the general public.
- Several countries, including Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands, queried the feasibility and need of assessing consumer views regarding food safety on a pan-European basis.
- Sweden asked whether it was indeed required to "rebuild consumer confidence," arguing that there were different predispositions in Member States regarding the public's trust of EU institutions.

4.3. AL Gassin confirmed that while EFSA would provide the basic messages on risk assessments conducted by its Panels, for communications to the public, it was indeed the responsibility of national authorities to develop their own communications strategies, adapting content, tone and choice of communications channels to meet local needs. The overall objective of the Advisory Forum's communications working group is indeed to enhance the coherence of messages on food safety across the Community by building collaboration between the communications contact points in Member States and EFSA.

4.4. With regards to the subject of consumer surveys, AL Gassin stated that this point had been identified by the Advisory Forum in defining the terms of reference for the Communications Working Group. EFSA had not yet been able to evaluate the feasibility of such an initiative and a first port of call would be to contact Eurobarometer as a possible source of information. AL Gassin agreed that consumer perceptions and trust in EU institutions could vary by country and that this could be evaluated through research.

5. WG Terms of Reference

5.1. The group discussed the terms of reference defined by the Advisory Forum (*see Annex C*) in order to define key priorities for 2004 and begin to establish working processes.

5.2. The group agreed that the overall benefit in establishing the Communications Working Group would be simply to work better together and to enhance the coherence of risk communications across Europe.

5.3. The group agreed on the following priority actions:

- Create a network of information and exchange. It was agreed to circulate a contact list for members with all communications details (*see Annex D – to be completed by members*).
- Develop a forward planning tool in order to identify “what is coming up” in the calendar of risk assessments and possible communications issues. It was agreed that EFSA would circulate to members a timeline for future risk assessments based on the 2004 Management Plan. Similarly, countries would send information to EFSA regarding upcoming events/issues at national level. EFSA will circulate a template for the collection of national information.
- Based on the above, the group will select 1-2 topics on which to test itself in terms of information sharing and development of possible consumer messages.
- The group agreed to carry out “post-mortems” on key issues addressed in Europe in order to learn from each others’ experiences and develop best practices.
- With regards to consumer perception, members agreed to share information on consumer surveys conducted at national level in order to evaluate the opportunity for developing a common methodology and timeframe for assessing and tracking consumer attitudes over time across the EU.

5.4. Greece, France and the Netherlands indicated that it would be useful for members to have information regarding: how national agencies/authorities are organised in Member States; their respective responsibilities and; who in the respective countries is responsible for risk communications. AL Gassin indicated that she would inquire as to whether such documentation existed within EFSA, and if so, would circulate to members.

5.5. Italy inquired as to the services provided by EFSA to national authorities. AL Gassin provided further information regarding EFSA’s role in the areas of risk assessment and risk communications.

5.6. Austria and the UK suggested the topic of stakeholder relations for future discussion. In particular, it was suggested that members share information regarding the similarities and differences between markets, both in terms of topics addressed as well as organisations consulted and consultation processes.

5.7. Greece questioned whether it would not be preferable to communicate on “food safety” as opposed to “risk.” AL Gassin indicated that EFSA’s role was indeed to provide information regarding risk assessments but according to its founding regulation could also communicate to the public on all areas within its remit. Such initiatives would require close collaboration with Member States. The Netherlands stressed however that campaigns promoting the safety of the food supply in general would not be appropriate.

5.8. The group discussed possible thematic issues for future collaboration.

- Several members discussed the opportunity of obesity and/or other nutrition-related topics. France informed the group of an upcoming meeting of national

food safety agencies to be organised by AFSSA on nutrition issues and nutrition policy. AL Gassin indicated that while nutrition-related topics could be of interest to members, EFSA's own remit in this area was limited, although the Authority could be asked to provide scientific advice on nutrition issues at the Commission's request.

- A preliminary list of topics suggested by members included: TSEs in sheep, pesticides and acrylamide.

6. Update on IT WG

6.1. AL Gassin presented the terms of reference of the IT Working Group (*see Annex E*). She indicated that this group would be constituted in 2004 after the new head of IT had joined EFSA. She invited the group to share their views regarding communications requirements linked to IT.

6.2. Members indicated that it would first be important to clearly define the group's information and communications needs prior to requesting specific IT support. The group agreed to constitute a task force to lead this work including representatives from the UK, Ireland and Belgium. The UK agreed to co-ordinate the task force's work in this area.

6.3. In addition, the task force will develop a template for cross-referencing the web sites of national food safety authorities/agencies as well as that of EFSA.

7. Standing Matters

7.1. Members updated each other regarding possible emerging issues relevant to risk communications as follows:

- EC: Beate Gminder reminded members of the conference on risk perception organised by DG SANCO on 4-5 December. She also indicated that the vote on Bt 11 maize would take place on 8.12.03.
- EFSA: AL Gassin informed the group of EFSA's upcoming opinion on NK 603 maize and indicated that the opinion and press materials would be shared with members in advance of the press conference.

8. Future Meetings

8.1. AL Gassin suggested that the Communications Working Group meet 4 times/year as indicated in the terms of reference defined by the Advisory Forum. These meetings could take place following the Advisory Forum meetings. AL Gassin offered to circulate dates with the minutes of the meeting.

9. Close of meeting

The Chair closed the meeting by thanking members for their contributions as well as the EFSA team for organisation of the meeting.