



European Food Safety Authority

Minutes

ADVISORY FORUM WORKING GROUP ON COMMUNICATIONS

22 April 2004

Diamant Centre, Brussels

Members of the Advisory Forum Working Group on Communications

Chair: Anne-Laure Gassin, Communications Director, EFSA

Present: Oskar Wawschinek, Austria
Pascal Houbaert, Belgium
Charlotte Bender, Denmark
Marie-Paule Benassi, European Commission
Beate Gminder, European Commission
Marja Pohjanpalo, Finland
Juliette Chevalier, France
Burckhard Viell, Germany
Dr Wayne Anderson, Ireland
Patrick Hau, Luxembourg
Knat Albert Solem, Norway
Irène Van Geest, The Netherlands
Jerker Sörenson, Sweden
Neil Martinson, UK

Observers: Kamila Fiedlerova, Czech Republic

European Food Safety Authority : Executive Director and Staff

Geoffrey Podger, EFSA	Dr Herman Koëter, EFSA
Dr Carola Sondermann, EFSA	Lucia de Luca, EFSA
Ingela Söderlund, EFSA	Thierry Beniflah, EFSA
Helen Kinghan, EFSA	Martine Warck

Apologies:

Georgia Grintzali, Greece
Dr Massimo Aquili, Italy
Sylwia Osmak, Poland

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Luis Salino, Portugal

Dr Héctor Alonso Martín, Spain

Andrea Jurcakova, Slovak republic

1. Introduction and Adoption of Agenda (Doc AF Comm WG 24.02.2004-1)

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 third meeting of the group and asked for comments on the draft agenda. The agenda was adopted without modification. The new members of the Working Group were introduced.

2. Minutes of the meeting 24 February 2004 and matters arising (Doc AF Comm WG 22.04.2004 – 2)

2.1 No further remarks from members. The minutes of the previous meeting were adopted and will be posted on the web.

3. Update by Geoffrey Podger, Executive Director, on progress at EFSA

3.1 Mr. Geoffrey Podger, Executive Director of EFSA, provided an update to the group on EFSA's activities and gave an overview of EFSA's move to Parma. He began by stating that the negotiations with the Italian authorities were proceeding well and that EFSA's Seat Agreement would be agreed in the near future.

3.2 Mr. Podger also informed the group of a document submitted to EFSA's Management Board affirming the need to define responsible timeframes for the delivery of scientific advice. He also informed the group regarding an upcoming stakeholder consultation regarding a guidance document for the risk assessment of GMOs (to be held 25 May 04 in Brussels) as well as the first in a series of scientific colloquia to be organised by EFSA, to be held on 28-29 June in Brussels concerning dioxins. He also indicated that EFSA had recently commissioned an audit to assess EFSA's current image among stakeholders and interested parties. The report of this evaluation, which involved certain members of the Advisory Forum, will be shared with Advisory Forum members at its June meeting.

3.3 Mr. Podger noted that there was an issue as to whether EFSA should change its procedural requirements on minority opinions. Currently if there were a small number of such opinions, they were of course noted in the main opinion. However if there were a relatively large number of minority opinions, no opinion could be issued. The alternative was to allow adoption of opinions by a simple majority of those present. However opinions decided on such a basis might have a credibility problem and it would be helpful to have the views of members from a communications point of view.

3.4 He also informed the group that EFSA's Advisory Forum would be carrying out in September a scenario planning exercise related to crisis management, to be organised

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jointly by EFSA and the European Commission, and covering issues related both to risk assessment and risk management. He also invited the group to provide EFSA with possible ideas for scenarios and/or recommendations regarding the choice of consultants for organisation of the crisis management scenario planning.

4. Update by Anne-Laure Gassin on EFSA communications activities

4.1 AL Gassin updated the group on the activities of the Communications department. The launch of EFSA's new website was associated with the publication of the first EFSA Newsletter (EFSANews) which will also be available through the web. All interested parties will have the possibilities to subscribe to this monthly publication, as well as to the Highlights via the Web. Moreover, EFSA's first Annual Report is about to be finalised, with printed versions in four languages available in June.

4.2 In preparation to the move to Parma, Italy, EFSA will hold a Press Conference on the occasion of the 14th meeting of the Management Board taking place in Parma on 27 April, and will be present at the international Food Fair Cibus with a stand for the whole duration of the Fair and with press activities on 6 May.

4.3 In order to promote better communication between the Authority and stakeholders, a consultation on a GMOs guidance document was launched via the web, a stakeholder conference will take place on 25 May in Brussels and stakeholders will also be invited to express their views with respect to the implementation of the new Regulation on feed additives and the role of EFSA therein, in the context of the Plenary meeting of the FEEDAP Panel scheduled 5-7 May in Barcelona. Finally, EFSA will organise its first 1st Scientific Colloquium on methodologies and principles for setting tolerable intake levels of dioxins, furans and Dioxin-like PCBs, to take place on 28-29 June 2004 in Brussels, Belgium.

4.4 The Advisory Forum is currently organising an event early November in Berlin. The Netherlands pointed out that as the topic of risk communications was identified in the agenda, it would be important to involve communications experts in programme development. Ingela Soderlund replied that this was a preliminary programme and that involvement of Communications experts would be sought in its further development.

4.5 Helen Kingham, updated the group on EFSA's new website as well as the modifications made to improve ease of navigation and access to information. Since EFSA's website will be continuously upgraded and improved, Helen asked all participants to send their feedback and comments to be taken into account in future modifications. Belgium asked if EFSA plans to analyse the user and subscriber profiles. Helen stated that this would be taken into account in future analyses of website statistics.

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4.6 Although the next point on the agenda was an update on the meeting of the Working Group on IT, the members decided to first discuss the topic of minority opinions and their communication as requested by Geoffrey Podger. Members agreed that minority opinions needed to be clearly communicated and explained. This was felt to be important in ensuring transparency and opening up scientific debate to the public arena. Members felt that consensus should be reached by scientific panels wherever possible, and that in practice the stating of minority opinions remained exceptional. Members also recognised the inherent difficulty in communicating a scientific opinion with a significant number of minority opinions. It was reported that in the Netherlands, for an opinion to be adopted, the number of minority opinions should not be greater than 1/3 panel members. Members of the group agreed to provide further information to EFSA on this topic in view of future discussions in the Scientific Committee mid-May.

5. Update on Advisory Forum Working Group on Information Technology (meeting 19.04.04). Exchange of views regarding communications requirements in this context.

5.1 Mr. Thierry Beniflah, Head of IT, reported that the extranet project had not been discussed in great depth at the last meeting of the Working Group on Information Technologies as most of the participants were not yet aware of the scope of the group and this project in particular. He informed members that the IT Working Group had agreed based on a proposal from the UK to set up a prototype Extranet in order to collect feedback from users and to test hypotheses. He also suggested that the communications departments liaise with their respective IT managers in order to better inform them of the needs for a shared IT tool.

5.2 Members subsequently discussed the presentation given by Anne-Laure Gassin at the IT Working Group meeting and summarizing the previous discussions held in the Communications Working Group (cf AF Comm WG 22.04.04 – 3). The United Kingdom suggested that such consultation via an extranet could delay the prompt answer needed when dealing with emerging risks and that it seemed impossible for the members to discuss and share documents in real time. AL Gassin pointed out that the extranet was indeed meant to provide a mechanism for IT-facilitated communications on emerging issues and a platform for discussion and organisation of information exchanges in real time. With regards to emerging risks and crisis situations, Anne-Laure further explained that the extranet would provide additional support for communications but would not replace the need for more immediate contact by other means (eg meetings, conference calls etc...). Thierry Beniflah added that such an extranet could be easily established and that in doing so, it would be important to carefully define user requirements in order to ensure that it effectively meets the needs of members.

5.3 The members pointed out some important requirements for the platform including points such as:

- an intelligent way of filtering the information
- need to allow links to members' websites while avoiding information overload

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- the problem of translation of documents posted should be addressed
- the extranet should not delay transmission of information especially in crisis situations
- cover not only emerging risks but also work in progress at EFSA and its Panels as well as in Member states
- allow exchange of data, opinions, and related communications materials.

5.4. Anne-Laure suggested that a final document summarising user requirements should be finalised and put forward to the Advisory Forum's June meeting. It would be important in doing so to ensure that the needs related to exchange of scientific information also be integrated. The United Kingdom also suggested to hold a mini-workshop to work through the structure of the future site. In parallel, work will be ongoing via the IT Working Group to develop a prototype extranet as outlined in para 5.1.

6. Communications on European food safety crises: a perspective from the European Commission – Beate Gminder

6.1 Beate Gminder, Spokeperson of Commissioner Byrne at the European Commission gave a brief introduction to the activities of her office and to the different approaches used to meet the press requests. She explained that the Commission interfaces each day with a press corps of 1000 journalists. Issues are very country-dependent and coverage on any given topic varies greatly across the EU. She also indicated the difficulty in predicting media response to a given issue. Beate Gminder also confirmed that members could receive embargoed press releases in advance (as EFSA does prior to issuing its opinions) in order to inform member states of upcoming announcements by the Commission.

7. Communications on semicarbazide: key learnings.

- **EFSA: overview of media coverage on semicarbazide (SEM) – Oct 2003**
- **Members: actions taken/perspective on SEM communications**

7.1. AL Gassin presented an analysis of the communications on semicarbazide and resulting media coverage following the publication of EFSA's opinion in October 2003. From a tour de table on the national experiences on this topic, the following elements were pointed out:

- very different responses and approaches taken by countries in light of the very sensitive nature of the issue
- in case of a potential risk, the consumer should be made aware of it but the communications strategy needs to be decided by national authorities based on local context
- the Netherlands presented a decision framework utilised to guide risk communications by the Dutch food safety authority. With regards to SEM, the decision was taken not to issue a press release but to announce the research and opinion on the authority's website.

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- the UK outlined the approach followed and the need felt by the FSA to highlight the issue of consumer choice, further to results of focus groups carried out among caretakers before and after the announcement made regarding SEM
- press releases were also issued in France and Finland, relaying the EFSA opinion and referring to own analyses
- many members expressed surprise regarding the minor response from media with Sweden stating that this was perhaps due to the fact that the message from EFSA was reinforced by national authorities
- the Commission representative agreed that we were prepared for a crisis and there was none
- finally, members also reiterated the need for access to the data considered by the EFSA panel, as discussed previously by the Advisory Forum

Irene van Geest (NL) informed members that she had retained a student who would be conducting research to evaluate the risk communications on SEM. She informed members that their input would be sought through interviews. A presentation of the results of this analysis could be presented at the group's October meeting.

7. Communications: forward planning

7.1 Science work programmes: EFSA and AF members

Mrs. Carola Sondermann, EFSA's Senior Press Officer, presented an overview of the upcoming scientific opinions to be published on the EFSA website as well as the communications initiatives planned (*presentation subsequently circulated to members*). The members also provided an update on issues arising in their countries, eg:

- consultation regarding cadmium contamination in a region in Belgium with information to the public about the measures to take
- a brochure on drinking water will be published addressing the problem of lead in water - Austria.

7.2 Ireland suggested that it could be useful to receive in advance of meetings the list of EFSA's upcoming publications of scientific opinions in order to come prepared to discuss. AL Gassin indicated that this could be done for future meetings although the objective was to try to bring to the group the most up-to-date information hence distribution would not be very far in advance of upcoming meetings. AL Gassin also encouraged members to keep the group updated regarding issues arising and upcoming opinions expected to be published in their respective countries.

7.3 With regards to more proactive work in the area of message development, and the topic of dioxins chosen at the last meeting, AL Gassin suggested that this could include the sharing of information about national experiences and initiatives as well as the position of consumers and industry. The developments resulting from the upcoming scientific colloquium on dioxins could also be taken into account in order to further define the scope of the work to be undertaken by the Communications working group.

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Members agreed with this approach and proposed to table the subject again following the June colloquium.

9. Any other business

9.1 The next meetings of the Advisory Forum Working Group on Communications will be on 15 June (Parma) and 7 October (Brussels). It was suggested that members arrive the evening before the Parma meeting and that a dinner, possibly with a guest speaker would be organised. AL Gassin invited members to provide suggestions for guest speakers for future meetings.

9.2 The issues of minority opinion and crisis scenario planning will be put on the agenda of the June meeting for further discussion.

9.3 Neil Martinson (UK) suggested that in advance of each meeting, it would be useful for members to summarise the key issues arising in their respective countries with respect to risk communications. He proposed to develop a template for a one-page summary document that could be easily prepared by members and in the future posted on the EFSA extranet. Members agreed with this suggestion and the Chair thanked the UK for this initiative.

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