

6th PLENARY MEETING OF THE EFSA EXPERT ADVISORY GROUP ON RISK COMMUNICATIONS (AGRC)

Meeting date: 11 December 2007
Venue: EFSA
Largo N. Palli 5/A - I-43100 Parma – Italy

MINUTES

Members of the Advisory Group on Risk Communications

Chair: Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle, Executive Director
Vice-Chair: Anne-Laure Gassin, Communications Director, EFSA

Present: Prof. Claude Fischler, CNRS, Paris
Prof. George Gaskell, London School of Economics

European Food Safety Authority
Herman Koëter, Science Director
Victoria Villamar, Acting Head of External Relations
Stephen Pagani, Head of Press Office
Christoph Buller, Head of PI&E
Carola Sondermann, Senior Press Officer
Alun Jones, Senior Press Officer
Dirk Detken, Head of HR ad interim
Juliane Kleiner, Team Leader SC
David Carlander, Scientific Officer SC
Anne Theobald, Scientific Officer AFC Panel

Apologies: Professor Jesús Contreras, University of Barcelona
Professor Baruch Fischhoff, Carnegie Mellon University
Professor Ragnar Löfstedt, King's College London
Professor Ortwin Renn, University of Stuttgart
Professor Armin Spök, IFZ Graz

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1. Welcome and introduction

Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle, Executive Director, opened the meeting and welcomed the attendees explaining that the participation of only two group members was due to the difficulty in scheduling the second meeting of the year and informed that a third member, Prof. Ortwin Renn, would connect by phone to discuss the item on cloning.

2. Adoption of the agenda

The Chair suggested that the recent creation of the FDA Risk Communications Advisory Committee chaired by Baruch Fischhoff, member of the group, could be discussed under item 9 and adopted the agenda as proposed, as no further items were indicated by the participants.

3. Declarations of interest

No declarations of interest were made in relation to the items on the agenda. Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle reminded the group that the new EFSA's policy on Declarations of Interest was on the agenda and that a presentation would be done later by Dirk Detken, Head of HR *ad interim*.

4. Minutes of meeting and matters arising

The minutes of the previous meeting were adopted without any changes. Concerning the items discussed in the previous meeting, Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle informed that cloning had been put again on the agenda to discuss further steps including dissemination of a report prepared by George Gaskell and other participants in the workshop held last year to review with social science experts consumer perception of products from cloned animals. She then gave the floor to Anne-Laure Gassin who updated the group on the Annual Review on Risk Communications and said that the final document had been received but further comments and corrections would be introduced. Dissemination of the document was discussed and the group agreed to publish it on the EFSA's website. Anne-Laure informed members of the suggestion made by Ragnar Löfstedt related to the possibility of submitting the document to an academic journal, possibly the Journal of Health Communications. Members agreed that the full report should be published on the EFSA website, and that in addition, a specific article could be drafted and submitted to such a journal.

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5. Introduction and update on EFSA's activities (Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle)

The Director gave an overview of the most relevant activities undertaken in the second semester of 2007, both with respect to science and corporate issues. She began by outlining recent developments with respect to EFSA's organisational structure. Some key positions have been filled, among which the heads for the two departments of Risk Assessment (RA) and Scientific Cooperation and Assistance (SCA). The latter includes the following units: scientific cooperation; data collection exposure, emerging risks, assessment methodology which support the work of the panels as well as the two units dedicated to the peer-review of active substances used in pesticides and co-operation with Member States in the area of data collection and analysis with respect to zoonoses. The Director confirmed that EFSA will work on strengthening the procedures necessary to face the increasing workload in 2008. The Executive Director also announced that the Panel on additives, flavourings, processing aids and materials in contact with food (AFC) will be split into two Panels, one dealing with food additives and nutrient sources added to food (ANS) and the other with food contact materials, enzymes, flavourings and processing aids (CEF), due to the large amount of work in this field, effective from spring 2008.

Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle informed the group that EFSA is working on implementing the internal and external review of its scientific outputs in order to pursue its objective of delivering scientific advice of the highest quality. An internal review system will be put in place and scientific outputs will be checked in order to have objective and independent science-based advice. The Director underlined the importance of independence as one of EFSA's key values and informed that more formalised procedures have been put in place with respect to Declarations of Interest in order to make the process more transparent, notably with respect to the screening of declarations made by panel and working group members. She informed that the new Declarations of Interests are more detailed and said that Dirk Detken, Head of HR ad interim, would explain this further later at the meeting.

The Director passed then to the issue of scientific co-operation with Member States and said that the last months had been very active in this area. She mentioned the front runner projects undertaken by EFSA and the Advisory Forum, the launch of twelve calls for the collection of data, draft evaluations and databases and the establishment of national focal points to help implement closer co-operation between EFSA and the Member States. The focal point initiative was launched last July and 18 agreements have already been signed.

Highlight was then given to some topics considered as challenges both in risk assessment and risk communication. She mentioned: the issue of GMOs and the continuous effort done by EFSA to be transparent and to strengthen the assessment procedures; aspartame and the possibility of undertaking new assessment initiatives, colours and the work done by a group involving psychological and behavioural experts. An opinion on this issue should be finalised by early March.

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6. EFSA's Policy on Dols (Dirk Detken)

Dirk Detken, Head of HR ad interim, presented the new policy on Declarations of Interest to the participants outlining that declaring interests is a legal obligation for all the experts working for EFSA, for Advisory Forum and Management Board members and also for the EFSA AD grade staff. He explained how members declare their interests both on an annual basis and for a specific meeting or mandate and outlined that having an interest does not mean that there is a conflict.

Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle stressed that it is important for EFSA to make sure that an expert has not a general conflict of interests and to make the procedure fully transparent. She also confirmed that EFSA can provide support to members in filling out their declarations of interest address any outstanding questions.

7. Update on EFSA's Communications activities (Anne-Laure Gassin)

Anne-Laure Gassin started her presentation reminding the group of the core objectives of communications at EFSA: visibility, simplicity, co-operation and coherence, and gave an overview of the activities undertaken in 2007, covering in particular press, web and publications.

As far as events are concerned, the floor was given to Alun Jones, senior press officer and coordinator for the 5 Year Anniversary project. He presented an overview of all the events organised in Parma in October and in Brussels in November to celebrate EFSA's 5th Anniversary. Two were the major events in Brussels: the Scientific Forum and the Summit that had in total over 800 participants and were both webcasted with over 2000 online visitors. Several journalists also attended the events resulting in coverage in 21 publications and media from 14 Member States and at the Pan-EU level.

Alun Jones underlined that the Scientific Forum was a productive scientific debate bringing together all major scientific and institutional players at the EU and national level, which raised EFSA's visibility as reference body for scientific risk assessment in food safety and its scientific profile. EFSA appeared as a responsive, proactive organisation working on future challenges in scientific risk assessment in food safety. Also the Summit was a good opportunity for EFSA stakeholders, European and national representatives to reflect on EFSA's achievements during its first 5 years as well as the future challenges ahead, and on its role in providing independent scientific underpinning to risk management decisions, generating confidence in EU food safety system.

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8. EFSA Risk Communications – new and ongoing areas of work:

8.1 Nanotechnology

An update on the risk assessment activities undertaken by EFSA in the area of nanotechnology was given. EFSA has since 2006 followed the area. EFSA has received a mandate from the European Commission at the end of June relating to the risks arising from nanotechnologies on food and feed safety and the environment. The mandate was discussed in the Scientific Committee and a revised mandate was sent to the European Commission with final terms of reference received at the beginning of December. EFSA will issue a draft opinion for public consultation by July 2008 and the final opinion is scheduled to be ready by autumn 2008. Main findings will be presented at the “Second Annual Nanotechnologies Safety for Success Dialogue Workshop” 2-3 October 2008. The Scientific Committee has established a Working Group on Nanotechnology that includes experts in nanotechnology, nanoscience, toxicology, biochemistry, nutrition, exposure and risk assessment.

The floor was given to Carola Sondermann, Senior Press Officer at EFSA, who gave outcomes from a recent workshop organised by DG RTD on communications outreach in nanotechnology, with the key objective to provide the European Commission with a set of operative recommendations to promote communication and dialogue on this issue.

A lively discussion on nanotechnology followed notably with respect to perceived risks and benefits, and implications for future risk communications in this area.

8.2 Cloning

Before starting the discussion on cloning, the group connected by phone with Ortwin Renn, member of the Advisory Group, who was able to listen to the presentation given by Juliane Kleiner and participate in the discussion which followed.

Juliane Kleiner presented the work EFSA is undertaking in the area of cloning. She reminded the group that the European Commission had requested EFSA to give advice on food safety, animal health, animal welfare and environmental implications of live cloned animals obtained through somatic cell nuclear transfer (SCNT) technique, their offspring and of the products obtained from those animals. A Working Group of the Scientific Committee has been created in order to prepare a draft scientific opinion which is foreseen to be endorsed on 19 December. A public consultation will take place in the beginning of year 2008 as well as a dedicated stakeholder meeting. After the public consultation a revised draft opinion will be prepared and is expected to be adopted by the Scientific Committee by May 2008. The Working Group is composed of 14 experts covering the areas of animal reproduction technology, genetic characterisation, animal health, animal welfare and toxicology. EFSA will only address scientific aspects and not ethical issues which is outside the remit of EFSA.

Following Juliane Kleiner's presentation, Victoria Villamar informed on the plans for the public consultation on cloning and on the meeting with stakeholders to be held. The meeting will

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have the aim to introduce the draft opinion on cloning and to allow interested parties to raise questions and exchange with the experts.

Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle introduced the report on public perception of food products from cloned animals, drafted by George Gaskell and other social science experts who participated in a dedicated meeting on consumer perception of products from animal cloning, organised by EFSA last June. She said that she considered the report a valuable contribution in better understanding the consumer perception of cloning and would be helpful to EFSA in preparing for future communications and stakeholder dialogue. She also proposed that some members of the group join the stakeholders' meeting in February, which was agreed by everyone. George Gaskell accepted the invitation and confirmed his participation as a speaker. The Advisory Group will also seek to involve Baruch Fischhoff in future through email and/or with a future conference call.

8.3 Zoonoses

The item was not tabled due to lack of time.

9. Any other business

The Chair reminded the announcement done at the beginning of the meeting, i.e. the FDA has recently created a Risk Communications Advisory Committee chaired by Baruch Fischhoff. It was proposed that actions for collaboration between the AGRC and the US Committee could be undertaken, which was agreed by all participants.

10. Date of next meeting

Members were provided with dates for 2008 (17 March and 13 October) which were fixed after a consultation done by e-mail.

Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle thanked the experts for their contributions and the lively discussions and closed the meeting at 15:00 h.