

7th PLENARY MEETING OF THE EFSA EXPERT ADVISORY GROUP ON RISK COMMUNICATIONS (AGRC)

Meeting date: 17 March 2008
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. Jesús Contreras, University of Barcelona
Prof. Claude Fischler, CNRS, Paris
Prof. George Gaskell, London School of Economics
Prof. Ragnar Löfstedt, King's College London
Prof. Ortwin Renn, University of Stuttgart
Dr. Armin Spök, IFZ Graz

European Food Safety Authority

Christoph Buller, Head of PI&E
David Carlander, Scientific Officer SC
Alun Jones, Senior Press Officer
Stephen Pagani, Head of Press Office
Reinhilde Schoonjans, Scientific Officer GMO Panel
Karen Talbot, Communications Advisor
Victoria Villamar, Acting Head of External Relations

Apologies: Prof. Baruch Fischhoff, Carnegie Mellon University

COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTORATE

1. Welcome and introduction

- 1.1 Anne-Laure Gassin, Director of Communications at EFSA, opened the meeting and welcomed the participants. She also indicated that a videoconference with DG Sanco on the draft questionnaire for the Eurobarometer on cloning would take place later in the morning and that a member of the group, Prof. Baruch Fischhoff, would connect by phone in the afternoon to follow discussions on GMOs and cloning and present the work of the FDA Risk Communications committee.

2. Adoption of the agenda

- 2.1 Anne-Laure Gassin asked the participants if any item should be added to the agenda. Prof. Ragnar Löfstedt suggested that the conference ESOF (Euro Science Open Forum) taking place in July in Barcelona, organised by EUFIC, and aspartame could be discussed under item 8. Meeting participants agreed and the agenda was adopted with those two additional topics.

3. Declarations of interest

- 3.1 Anne-Laure Gassin reminded the group of the Specific Declarations of Interests related to the meeting and circulated together with the agenda. Members filled in the forms which were checked and reviewed both by Anne-Laure Gassin and Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle. Members were also reminded to provide their Annual Declarations which will be published on the EFSA website.
- 3.2 Prof. George Gaskell referred to the biographies published on the website and asked if any update would be possible. Anne-Laure Gassin suggested that the existing biographies are circulated to the members for revision. Updated documents will be then published replacing the old ones.

4. Minutes of meeting and matters arising

- 4.1 The minutes of the previous meeting were adopted without any changes.
- 4.2 Anne-Laure Gassin mentioned that the minutes of the meeting will in future be circulated to the group members for approval by written procedure.

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5. Update on progress at EFSA by Anne-Laure Gassin

- 5.1 Anne-Laure Gassin updated the members on the latest developments in the EFSA Communications Directorate mentioning the growing team and providing information results achieved in media, web, publications and events, highlighting in particular media coverage through 2007 and beginning of 2008. In relation to future challenges and opportunities, the increased role of EFSA in the area of nutrition was mentioned amongst others.
- 5.2 Talking about the future, Anne-Laure Gassin also indicated the importance of the continuous collaboration between EFSA and the Member States and the need of facilitating delivery of targeted communications by national authorities. She mentioned the Focal Points created to support the Advisory Forum and to help build outreach in the Member States. Building awareness of EFSA's role and work amongst the scientific community is also an ongoing objective. EFSA's Scientific Cooperation unit will be developing new tools such as the EFSA journal, a scientific bulletin and more generally, EFSA would be enhancing its presence at major scientific events.
- 5.3 Anne-Laure Gassin informed the group that the Commission's Internal Audit Service (IAS) carried out an audit on EFSA's Communications activities in February, with a particular focus on internal validation of external communications processes. EFSA will look to strengthen its internal processes based on forthcoming recommendations of the IAS.
- 5.4 After a question on how EFSA deals with different points of views of experts regarding its scientific work, Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle, who could not be present at the opening of the meeting and had joined the group later, stressed that the process EFSA is using to deliver its scientific opinions is very important. Panel opinions are the result of collective discussion and decisions. EFSA is putting in place an internal and external review system to continue to enhance the quality of its scientific outputs. EFSA would soon be publishing a document outlining how it selects scientific experts, in particular for the constitution of working groups, a process formalised by a Decision of the Executive Director.
- 5.5 Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle requested the group to move on to the topic of the Annual Review on Risk Communications. Anne-Laure Gassin informed that the last version was sent back to the authors and to Prof. George Gaskell who had been asked to review the document. As soon as the review is finalised, it will be made available on EFSA's website and it might also be submitted for publication to an academic journal, as suggested by one of the authors.
Members were asked to provide their views on the document and their input regarding future developments in the evaluation of EFSA's communications activities.

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6. Cultural attitudes to food, nutrition and food-related risks (Claude Fischler)

- 6.1 Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle gave the floor to Prof. Claude Fischler so that he might share with the group highlights from his latest book, *"Manger. Français, Européens, Américains face à l'alimentation"*, and thanked him for having shared a copy of this publication with EFSA. Claude Fischler pointed out that the book is on attitudes, beliefs and perceptions related to food and diet, and not on consumer behaviour, and briefly explained the content focusing on relevant aspects for EFSA.

7. EFSA Risk Communications on:

7.1. Cloning

The group connected by videoconference with Jean François Roche, Robert van Hoorde and Michael Walsh of DG SANCO to discuss a draft questionnaire for a Eurobarometer on cloning which the Commission was intending to field shortly. After a lively discussion and upon Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle's request, it was agreed that members would provide further written comments on the questionnaire so that EFSA could forward these to DG SANCO by midday on 18 March.

- 7.1.1 The Chair subsequently gave an overview of the most relevant activities undertaken in 2007, providing details on core business, HR issues and achievements/challenges arising from the 5th Anniversary events. Objectives for 2008 were also highlighted and in particular she mentioned as key areas of focus: continuous delivery of best scientific advice in a timely manner; the quality of EFSA's scientific outputs; and the effectiveness of EFSA communications.

7.2 Zoonoses

The item was not tabled due to lack of time.

7.3 GMOs

Alun Jones, Senior Press officer at EFSA, made a presentation on "communications challenges" in GMOs, outlining recent GM issues covered in the media and the type and tone of coverage in the media.

AGRC members asked questions relating to the NPTII gene, i.e. how it functions as a marker in the selection of transformed GM plant cells and why the applicant uses this antimicrobial resistance gene as a marker. EFSA explained that from a scientific perspective, the likelihood of a gene transfer from the GM plant into a bacterium is extremely low.

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AGRC members advised that EFSA continue to work closely with Member States to share experience and knowledge, and build a sense of ownership in the risk assessment process. The AGRC also suggested that EFSA continue to communicate as actively as possible about its GMO activities with Member States and other stakeholders. EFSA informed that it would be holding a meeting with NGOs in Spring 2008. Members stressed the importance of engaging in public discussion and debate, acknowledging that EFSA's role was to address the scientific questions and not the societal and political aspects of the debate.

7.4 FDA Risk Communications Advisory Committee (Baruch Fischhoff)

Baruch Fischhoff who had connected by phone before the discussion on GMOs introduced himself to the group and gave an update on the recently created FDA Risk Communications Advisory Committee which he chairs. His description together with a presentation sent by e-mail allowed the group to have a detailed overview of the mandate of the committee.

7.5 Food colours / Evaluation of Southampton study

Ragnar Löfstedt informed the group that, at the request of the UK Food Standards Agency, he would be carrying out a review of the actions and communications in the UK in relation to the Southampton study which linked increased hyperactivity in some children with the consumption of mixtures of food additives or colours. He announced that the analysis would be submitted to a peer-review journal for publication and he would keep the group updated on developments.

The floor was then passed to Steve Pagani, Head of Press Office at EFSA, who gave an update of the actions undertaken by the Authority. He outlined EFSA's communications approach concerning the AFC Panel's review of the study and rationale for issuing a press release. Steve Pagani also told the group that EFSA had kept in close contact with the Food Standards Agency in the UK to ensure they were aware and could prepare for EFSA's communication. Members of the EFSA Advisory Forum also received the press release under embargo as per EFSA's usual practice. Coverage up to the point of the meeting was largely factual, though some of the more popular press in the United Kingdom reported, inaccurately, that EFSA should have banned the colours.

8. Any other business

The two items proposed by Prof. Ragnar Löfstedt at the beginning of the meeting could not be discussed due to lack of time and departure of the experts.

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The Chair apologised for this and indicated that EFSA would follow up on the Barcelona conference and that these topics could be put back on the agenda at the next AGRC meeting. She thanked the participants for the interesting discussions and Baruch Fischhoff for connecting by phone.

The meeting was closed at 15.30 h.