COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTORATE

10th PLENARY MEETING OF THE EFSA EXPERT ADVISORY GROUP ON RISK COMMUNICATIONS (AGRC)

Meeting date: **29 May 2009**

Venue: **EFSA**
Largo N. Palli 5/A - I-43100 Parma – Italy

MINUTES

Members of the Advisory Group on Risk Communications

Chair: Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle, EFSA Executive Director.

Present: 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

European Food Safety Authority
Anne-Laure Gassin, Communications Director
Karen Talbot, Communications Advisor
Luisa Venier, Legal Officer
Yenny Gamming, Web Manager
Andrew Cutting, Press Officer
Bernhard Berger, Head of Unit Scientific Cooperation

Apologies: Dr. Armin Spök, IFZ Graz

1. Welcome and introduction

1.1 Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle welcomed participants to the meeting and mentioned that apologies had been received from Armin Spok.

2. Adoption of the agenda

2.1 Anne-Laure Gassin mentioned that at the last meeting there had been a proposal, linked to the issue of DoIs, to discuss the issue of professional ethics in science, drawing on the experience of the European Group on Ethics and others. The item had not been scheduled for this meeting due to the unavailability of the head of Legal and Policy Affairs, Dirk Detken, whose involvement was important. But the group would come back to the issue.

2.2 George Gaskell informed the group that he had read the ethical guidelines for US committees which areinteresting in relation to conflict of interest issues. He added that it would be good to return to the issue with Dirk Detken at the next meeting given some of the complex issues around research funding and the inter-relationship between the public and private sectors.

2.3 Ragnar Löfstedt added that there were issues around transparency to consider and also in relation to whether the amount of funding received for research from industry was taken into account when considering conflicts, as is the case in the FDA.

2.4 Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle said that she would like to discuss the issues further with the group. Not only are there financial interest in relation to work undertaken by experts with private sector funding, but there are also important issues surrounding intellectual interests around the role and work of experts at a national and European level. If a publicly employed expert worked on an issue at a national level should that be considered a conflict of interest for EU level work? Some have argued it should be; but it could lead to having no relevant expertise available at an EU level and would be helpful to explore further with the group.

3. Declarations of interest

3.1. Anne-Laure Gassin confirmed that all annual DoIs were now completed. Specific DOIs outstanding were finalised with members concerned.

4. Minutes of the previous meeting and matters arising

4.1. Minutes of the last meeting were agreed.

4.2. On matters arising, George Gaskell and Ortwin Renn referred back to the item on nanotechnologies. In a general discussion, the group touched on-going approaches to development of nano applications and related issues such as labelling and whether informed choice is possible through labelling if safety assessments have not been concluded or uncertainties remained. Although the issue remains low key for EFSA communications at present, the subject remains important and is monitored on an ongoing basis Ortwin Renn also drew attention to the group to a recent publication by DG Research including Commission recommendation on *A code of conduct for responsible nanosciences and nanotechnologies research* and Council conclusions on *Responsible nanosciences and nanotechnologies research.* This document was circulated to AGRC members.

4.3. All other issues where there were matters arising from the previous meeting were tabled on the agenda.

5. Update on EFSA's activities

5.1. Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle updated the members on EFSA's latest activities. She mentioned her recent visit to the USA, with Panel chairs and other EFSA staff. The objective was to improve knowledge of the US food safety system and build awareness of EFSA so as to strengthen cooperation. Visits included CDC in Atlanta, the US Agriculture Dept Centre at Fort Collins, and the USDA, EPA and FDA in Washington. The visit was successful and has facilitated strengthening of regular on going contact and better appreciation of roles.

5.2. Ragnar Löfstedt asked if there was any specific discussion of risk communications, which he understands to be high on the FDA's agenda. Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle replied that the issue was not discussed specifically but came up in a number of discussions.

5.3. Claude Fischler mentioned that his US PhD student was interviewing French and US consumers and where they would eat if their goal in life was to eat well. Both groups were saying they would eat where they are now, but for different reasons. The French valued the taste, quality etc of their local food; in the US they thought that their own food was best as it was well regulated and safe.

5.4. Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle also mentioned work on a review of the harmonisation of risk assessment terminology for DG SANCO carried out by Tony Hardy and the UK's Central Science Laboratory in the non food area. There

can be many different expressions for the same term and various ways of expressing uncertainty/risk. EFSA is planning to commission a similar study in relation to our scientific outputs and the words used in the food area; and to then see if we can learn any lessons to improve the consistency and clarity of how we describe risk. George Gaskell said that similar work had been done in the 1980s in the US in relation to understanding of State Department advice on risks.

5.5. Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle clarified that next steps would be dependent on the findings of our study. If there are inconsistencies between panels and issue around different words being used this will be addressed together with the Scientific Committee to help ensure we explain our work clearly and transparently. The AGRC will be kept apprised of the developments of this work.

5.6. Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle then raised the aim of EFSA organising an international conference on risk communications and proposed to come back to the group on this at the next meeting in order to help EFSA in building the overall approach and future programme. Members expressed their support for such an initiative.

5.7. Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle next updated the group on cooperation with Member States, which EFSA is working to strengthen, recognising that there are national differences and needs, which vary dependent on size of national agency, capacity and resource at national level etc. The aim at a time when resources are scarce for all is to aim to plan together as effectively as possible and draw more efficiently on the risk assessment resource available in Europe in a coordinated manner. This will be discussed with both the Management Board and the Advisory Forum.

6. Development of the AGRC

6.1. Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle introduced this item explaining that no major revision of the terms of reference (ToR) of the group were being proposed. Two small points to clarify related to the rules of procedure for the constitution of the group and the appointment of members. By making a minor change to the ToR it would it be possible to update the list of members without reviewing the decision to establish the group itself. The substantive point was to address the issue of vacancies in the group.

6.2 Anne-Laure Gassin introduced the discussion on vacancies. 2/3 vacancies were to be filled and there was a desire to at least try to address geographical and

gender spread issues as well as expertise in different areas. A number of CVs were shared with the group. There was agreement on the suitability of a number of candidates with a mix of experience and expertise. The group recommended that the Executive Director consider in particular the Italian sociologist Massimiano Bucchi (University of Trento), the Portuguese nutritionist and consumer perception research specialist Maria Daniel Vaz de Almeida (University of Porto) and the Hungarian sociologist Anna Vári.

7. Update on EFSA communications activities

7.1. Anne-Laure Gassin informed the group that work was in progress to update and revise the EFSA communications strategy, first adopted in 2006. The approach will be discussed with the Management Board (MB) in October, then a draft will be subject to public consultation before final agreement by the EFSA MB in December. More information would be provided by e-mail and at the next meeting.

7.2. Anne-Laure Gassin then gave an update on the significant media coverage being obtained by EFSA, especially in areas such as nutrition and health claims. A number of issues have presented EFSA with communications challenges and opportunities since the last meeting – swine flu, nicotine in wild mushrooms, smoke flavourings – and these were briefly outlined to the group by Anne-Laure Gassin and Andrew Cutting to obtain their views and suggestions.

7.3. Members recognised the challenges and difficulties around appropriate communications on areas such as smoke flavourings where possible risks may occur from various substances used but at different levels, with different certainty and limited knowledge on their use. Members acknowledge that transparency is important, but George Gaskell highlighted the risk of fear fatigue and the issue of whether limits to transparency are possible or appropriate was considered. Ortwin Renn stated that one factor to take into account is whether there is an urgent need for consumers to be informed at the time when risk assessment findings are published.

7.4. Members consider the flu to be a difficult communications challenge. Ortwin Renn raised the issue of whether using the host animals name was always appropriate. It could lead to confused messages being taken. Ragnar Löfstedt raised the issue of some of the language used in relation to such issues, such as the word pandemic and what is understood by that. Members felt that language

could be looked at more closely to avoid journalists and others misunderstanding the issues.

7.5. Bernhard Berger, EFSA's Head of Scientific Cooperation Unit, then introduced an update on work to develop the EFSA journal, an effort to increase EFSA's visibility in the scientific community. George Gaskell commented that this was good for EFSA experts but that their names needed to be upfront, like authors of papers are, rather than listed as panel members in a footnote. Ragnar Löfstedt raised the issue of there not being a peer review of EFSA's scientific outputs. Bernhard Berger pointed out the legal framework for EFSA's work and the fact that once an EFSA opinion is adopted by its independent scientific experts it cannot be changed. Ortwin Renn pointed out that advertising the journal, eg in publications such as Nature, could be useful. Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle reminded members that the purpose of the journal was simply to get scientific visibility for the benefit of EFSA's experts; it was not a new undertaking in any other way.

7.6. Yenny Gamming then introduced some web statistics on EFSA's audiences and the use of web metrics as a monitoring and evaluation tool. Ragnar Löfstedt asked how EFSA compared to, for example, the FDA in terms of web visits and was any benchmarking done. Yenny Gamming replied that benchmarking was difficult due to lack of comparable data and that in her experience while the EFSA site was good, more work was needed to assist users in site navigation, which is underway.

7.7. Andrew Cutting briefly introduced a report of EFSA's 2008 media coverage. George Gaskell questioned the use of a favourability index and related targets. It may be better to look at positive and neutral together. On continuing high GMO related coverage George Gaskell suggested a further analysis removing the GMO coverage in order to show the overall picture without that one factor and asked whether the GMO panel was aware of the high profile political dimension and interest around their work. He also said that positive coverage of animal cloning was a good example of how EFSA can successfully position itself as regards what is and isn't its role. He also remarked on how the UK appeared to be most positive and asked how systematic the media monitoring and analysis work was. He queried whether EFSA could do any more qualitative work to explore more fully the findings and possible significance.

7.8. Anne-Laure Gassin said it was important to track favourability and that negative coverage was not necessarily indicative of a problem; however, we needed to

look behind the figures in order to understand better what the negative coverage was about and whether this related to any issue which could be addressed by EFSA with a view to continuing to improve its communications. Ragnar Löfstedt asked about the pro-activity of the media work and Andrew Cutting explained that a pro-active and targeted approach is taken on key issues. Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle said GMO Panel members were aware of the policies issues surrounding their work. Ortwin Renn suggested that perhaps the successful separation of ethical and wider issues from EFSA's own scientific work on animal cloning could be considered useful learning in relation to GMOs. He also asked about media training. Karen Talbot explained the programme organised internally to help train both internal EFSA staff and scientific experts.

8. Risk communications guidelines

8.1. Karen Talbot explained that work was progressing with the Advisory Forum Communications Working Group (AFCWG) to develop guidelines that would be useful for MS and EFSA. The proposal was for sections on principles around good risk communications, to map types of risk scenarios ad use case histories to illustrate best practice and learning, as well as to consider tools and channels appropriate to different audiences and risks.

8.2. George Gaskell commented that the case histories were most important. Principles are widely espoused but case studies covering what was done, why, the outcomes and lessons, would be most valuable. There was a need to recognise there would be differences as regards audiences and approaches between EFSA and MS. Ortwin Renn asked who the audience was. Karen Talbot replied the main audience was at MS level: these would be used by practitioners as an aide memoire and for their directors and experts to help build understanding of the value of communications based on sound principles and best practices. Secondary audiences were also important as the document would demonstrate transparently how EFSA and MS seek to communicate effectively on risks. Ortwin Renn felt there was a need to differentiate between EFSA and MS and between individual MSs. Perhaps more than one document could be useful taking into account the different levels of communications experience of potential users. He also suggested that a database of good practices would be an important contribution.

8.3. Classification of risk and scenarios for illustrating the guidelines with case histories were discussed. Ragnar Löfstedt suggested taking into account work on categorisation of risks, such as natural and unnatural ,voluntary and involuntary

risks etc. Case studies could also focus on well-known issues such as BSE. Claude Fischler suggested a section with 10 do's and don'ts. Ortwin Renn said it should be a living document. Ragnar Löfstedt said there was interest in these issues in Sweden and perhaps there was an opportunity to work with the Swedish presidency in this area.

9. EFSA's approach to public consultation on scientific outputs

9.1. Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle explained that this work was to clarity the circumstances in which EFSA would engage in consultation and it was an important aspect of transparency, enabling stakeholders to understand when, why and how they would be engaged in the process. Luisa Venier, EFSA's Legal Officer, explained that this was a first step in this area of policy development.

9.2. George Gaskell supported the work. He mentioned UK Cabinet Office guidelines on public consultations. This work is part of good governance. He raised further issues around what is the aim of the work and differentiating between what EFSA legitimately will take into account in its risk assessment work and wider issues such as people's views and concerns. How feedback is taken into account is important and how and why points are accepted or not needs to be done consistently.

9.3. Claude Fischler supported George Gaskell's views and added it was important to be clear that such a process was not about achieving consensus or managing diversity. Ortwin Renn added that the focus was on risk assessment not risk management issues for EFSA and that needed to be very clear to stakeholders. Where appropriate, comments and contributions that are legitimate but not relevant to EFSA could be channelled to relevant bodies so that people feel their input is still valued.

9.4. Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle closed the discussion indicating that the subject of stakeholder engagement would come back on the agenda of a future AGRC meeting.

10. Kings college risk communications review

10.1 The document was agreed for publication.

11. AOB

11.1 George Gaskell asked about progress on the Eurobarometer. Anne-Laure Gassin responded that it was still work in progress as regards a possible future call for tender with discussions ongoing with DG Communications regarding access of EU agencies to Commission framework contracts. Ortwin Renn informed the group of the recent publication of *Food Safety Governance: integrating science, precaution and public involvement* ensuing from the research project SAFE FOODS.

12. Date of next meeting

12.1 19th October 2009