European Food Safety Authority

COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTORATE

14th Plenary Meeting
ADVISORY GROUP ON RISK COMMUNICATIONS (AGRC)

Meeting date: **28 FEBRUARY 2011**
Venue: **EFSA**
Largo N. Palli 5/A – 43121 Parma – Italy

MINUTES

Chair:
Anne-Laure Gassin, Director of Communications (on behalf of the Executive Director, Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle, who was unable to participate in the meeting)

Present:
Prof. Massimiano Bucchi, University of Trento
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:
Hubert Deluyker, Director of Scientific Cooperation and Assistance (since 1.05[1], Director of Risk Assessment and Scientific Assistance)
Olivier Ramsayer, Director of Administration (since 1.05[1], Director of Resources and Support Directorate)
Djien Liem, Head of Scientific Cooperation and Advisory Forum (since 1.05[1], Head of Unit, Scientific Committee)
Steve Pagani, Head of Press Office (since 1.05[1], Head of Media Relations)
Tobin Robinson, Head of Emerging Risks (session on Emerging Risks)
Laura Smillie, Communications Adviser (since 1.05[1], Acting Head of Editorial Unit)
Luisa Venier, Legal Officer
Victoria Villamar, Assistant to the Executive Director (since 1.05[1], Senior Officer – Governance and Institutional Liaison)

Observer: Livia Briese (Risk communication manager – ECHA, Helsinki)

[1] EFSA implemented a new organisational structure as of 1.05 (http://www.efsa.europa.eu/en/efsawho/efsastructure.htm)

1. Welcome and introduction

Anne-Laure Gassin welcomed participants to the meeting and presented apologies for the Executive Director, Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle, who due to unforeseen business priorities was unable to attend. Anne-Laure introduced Livia Briese, a colleague from the European Chemicals Agency (ECHA) who joined the group as an observer as she is considering establishing a similar advisory group for ECHA.
Apologies were received from Daniela Vaz de Almeida and Armin Spök. The group was also informed that due a change in his job portfolio, Armin Spök resigned on Friday 25th February 2011. AGRC members regretted the departure of Armin Spök and thanked him for his contributions over the years. It was agreed that the group would reflect upon possible new candidates to join the group, noting that the group could expand by four additional members, if deemed appropriate.

2. Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

3. Declarations of interest (DoIs)

Grateful thanks were extended to all members present at the meeting who had updated their annual Declarations of Interests. Maria Daniel Vaz de Almeida's ADoI who could not attend the meeting would be reminded to update her Annual DOI.

In preparation for this meeting, an invitation to process the specific DoI was sent on 17 February. G. Gaskell, C. Fischler and M. Bucchi submitted their declarations which were approved.

G. Gaskell: declared an interest relating to agenda item 8 – Eurobarometer Study - as per his Annual DoI (Consultancy/Advisory 09/2010 at EFSA – Subject matter: Analysis of key data/aspects of EFSA Eurobarometer on Food Risk / Consultancy fee to support a PhD student conducting multivariate analyses of the Eurobarometer survey and reporting the outcomes to EFSA).

C. Geslain-Lanéelle reminded members about the importance of respecting the DoI process and explained that the concept would be discussed further and its implications for EFSA when the group addressed the agenda item on independence.

4. Minutes of the previous meeting and matters arising

The group was informed that the minutes from the last meeting (11 October 2010) had been agreed by written procedure and published on the website.

In follow-up to the last meeting, it was noted that the OBSERVA – Science media monitoring system – had been included in EFSA's research priorities paper, submitted to the European Commission (DG RESEARCH) at the end of 2010.

EFSA outlined that it would work with the London School of Economics in support of further Eurobarometer data analysis and where possible provide Member States with perspectives on the results. This is in progress and the group looked to forward to learning about the initial results from G. Gaskell later in the day.

5. Update on EFSA's activities

Anne-Laure Gassin proceeded to give an overview of the key results achieved by EFSA in 2010 including the number of scientific outputs and how EFSA's work on regulated products and substances is informing the organisational restructuring process that is currently ongoing.

From a communications perspective, Anne-Laure highlighted the Management Board's ratification of EFSA's revised Communications Strategy 2010-2013 as well as the work undertaken on the Eurobarometer on food-related risks. She outlined the important evolution that had been made in terms of the EFSA website, with a 24% volume increase in traffic (over 3 million visitor sessions) with a 92% satisfaction rating from a recent web user survey. With the EFSA Journal being available online since 2010, this is significant contribution underpinning EFSA's work in the scientific community.

6. Update on Communications Strategy 2010-2013 and related activities

A-L.Gassin provided more information about the revised Communications Strategy 2010-2013 outlining the key priority areas addressed in the strategy: Simplicity & Transparency; Independence; Visibility & Outreach; Coherence; and Dialogue. She gave examples of some of the areas the Authority is considering addressing through the thematic approach, including Independence.

A-L.Gassin highlighted that EFSA's revised communications strategy (2010-2013) will provide an opportunity to strengthen public outreach in cooperation with Member States including cooperation in communications in key thematic areas, providing greater opportunity to share ideas/views on ways to enhance risk communications, making reference to the important on-going activities with the Advisory Forum's Working Group on Communications.

By means of illustration, L. Smillie presented EFSA's integrated communications approach in the area of zoonoses, which aims to increase target audience understanding and appreciation of EFSA's contribution to the work and cooperation in the area of zoonoses.

Commenting on the revised strategy G. Gaskell noted that thematic content provides structure to EFSA's work and wondered if the themes follow science or perception, highlighting that the Eurobarometer results could provide many insights.

In general, the group had reservations about including independence in the thematic approach as this is a process issue rather than an output. M. Bucchi recommended that

Independence could be stigmatised by making it a theme as this concept means different things to different audiences.

C. Fischler raised questions about the negative perceptions about chemicals in food. A-L Gassin explained how by providing further context, a thematic approach would help to better explain EFSA's work as well as why there are chemicals in food.

Several group members found the data provided on media coverage of interest and outlined their willingness to be consulted on the interpretation of such data in the future. When asked about the tone of coverage, S. Pagani explained that it was about 80% neutral and 10-12% negative.

In follow-up to R. Löfstedt's comments on halting negative media stories, S. Pagani explained that EFSA cannot take a stand as such on issues raised in the media but the Authority seeks to provide a more informed point of view and sets the record straight when inaccuracies are published.

O. Renn welcomed the recognition of the need to simplify EFSA's work as people do not always know or understand what the Authority does. He recommended that EFSA follow a targeted approach as different audiences (eg stakeholders, media, consumers..) will have different information needs. G. Gaskell added that the stakeholders are increasingly suffering from information overload and fatigue and that their knowledge should not be over-estimated. EFSA's work needs to be made more accessible. The group echoed their support of this important point.

D. Liem agreed that people do not understand well what we do and therefore the thematic approach gives EFSA an opportunity to play to its strengths.

During the discussions on zoonoses the issue of decontamination of carcasses (eg chlorination of chicken) was raised and how risk management with respect to risk of microbial contamination differs in the US to EU. The group asked a variety of questions about the process itself which were explained by EFSA staff. In this context, Hubert Deluyker highlighted the important investment made in the EU regarding measures taken to prevent, control, reduce microbial contamination from farm to fork. We needed to promote further this approach and also find ways of giving a voice to farmers given their important investment in this area.

Djien Liem reiterated that while chemicals in food are perceived by consumers as constituting a risk, microbiological hazards in the food chain constitute a much greater public health risk. EFSA's communications activities on zoonoses, in co-operation with the Commission and Member States, would be important in helping to build awareness and appreciation for the programmes in place in the EU to protect consumers from such risks.

A-L. Gassin provided an overview on EFSA's activities in relation to the artificial sweetener aspartame following the recent publication of two scientific studies.
Recognising the controversy surrounding aspartame, G. Gaskell questioned if there are similarities between aspartame & GMOs and wondered how other agencies in other regions have reacted, making specific reference to the FDA.

C. Fischler told the group that he had recently been interviewed on the subject of aspartame and explained that as the role of sugar in the diet is sometimes perceived as being morally wrong (ie indulgent, only conferring a sweet taste to foods), sugar substitutes can also be questioned on this same ground. He further explained that the French agency ANSES has an advantage that in its work relating to aspartame, its remit covered both risks and benefits, therefore allowing greater context to be provided.

Having considered EFSA's web news story that was provided in the participant packs, M. Bucchi asked if there is something inherent in EFSA's communications as the Authority is often in defensive position. D. Liem explained that EFSA cannot respond to each request relating to aspartame as the organisation needs to prioritise its work. V. Villemar stressed that the Authority does have a responsibility to respond to concerns without being overly reactive. L. Smillie pointed out that this is where the thematic approach can provide assistance.

O. Renn suggested that criticisms usually address three common problems when it comes to lack of independence: Bias, Complacency and Ignorance. He suggested that by categorising criticisms through the creation of a template, it may assist in giving a sense of perspective and guidance regarding the anchoring of new criticisms in known, existing situations.

7. Independence & communicating in a challenging environment

L. Smillie outlined some of the independence challenges EFSA faces. She provided an overview of the current trust environment making specific reference to the French Mediator case and the European Parliament's ruling on the handling of the H1N1 crisis. She provided media monitoring insights and consumer research results demonstrating how these have helped shape EFSA's work on Openness and Transparency as well as the Authority's preparatory work on an Independence Policy.

Considering the calibre of its scientific outputs, G. Gaskell commented that it is a very worrying trend that EFSA could be taken to court should a party disagree with one of its opinions. He continued that for EFSA to counter-challenge on independence will always fail; arguments need to be focussed on the quality of the decision-making process. Independence is not an end in and of itself and EFSA needs to reframe the debate.
The group agreed that further clarification and communications were needed on the role of EFSA experts, funding, the role of the panel, the ultimate decision-making process and what constitutes a conflict of interest.

A-L Gassin explained the gap between perception and the stringent processes and procedures EFSA has in place. She further explained how EFSA is looking at ways to explain how it includes pluralistic scientific views in its work. C. Fischler questioned the reference to pluralism arguing that whilst this is relevant to decision-making processes it is not relevant as such to science. He shared a presentation with the group that had interesting consumer insights with respect to paradoxes underlying perception of independence. He questioned the focus on EFSA's external experts and argued that

EFSA could put more attention and weight behind its inhouse scientists, thereby considering the scientific experts as consultants.
M. Bucchi found the gap between perception and reality interesting and explained that it reflected the breadth of audiences EFSA needs to address and their subsequent expectations. He stressed that for consumers what is important is whether EFSA is doing its job whereas actors involved will focus more on the process itself.

O. Renn stated that direct attacks on independence require a direct response. He referred to his work with the US Natural Academy of Science where DoI officers are appointed to every meeting and the first 30 minutes of each meeting is dedicated to declaration of interests.

L. Briese explained the ECHA Board of appeal. This is an independent structure, which involves minimal costs and has not been the subject of debate.

G. Gaskell wondered if there was a means to peer review the work of the Scientific Committee. R. Löfstedt interjected that such discussions had taken place in the US but that this model was generally not supported in the EU as the EU agencies are de facto independent.

D. Liem found the discussions very interesting and explained that EFSA has in fact peer review built into the work of its scientific panels. EFSA opinions are the outcome of collective decision-making of panel members. EFSA needs to ensure timeliness in its scientific work – taking into account the peer review process of Panels - as well as scientific integrity and quality.

The discussions concluded with specific reference to certain stakeholder groups and broad societal perceptions. O. Renn stated that certain groups will never change their minds about EFSA but when moving towards mobilising the thinking of those who wish to actively contribute to the scientific process, EFSA has made significant progress.
The group noted that many of the criticisms being directed at EFSA do not relate to science but to broad societal and political issues. G. Gaskell highlighted the clear correlation between the general level of concern and concerns related to food.

L. Briese asked about EFSA's level of engagement in social media as these are important media for proactively and reactively responding to independence-related issues. A-L Gassin explained that EFSA is in the process of drafting a social media strategy. It is assessing the different platforms and the appropriate level of engagement for each but is not currently active in this area.

Before the coffee break, A-L Gassin shared EFSA's new corporate video on risk assessment with the group. She explained that the concept had been tested internally and was the result of collaboration across EFSA's scientific and communications directorates. The group generally liked the initiative and gave some pointers for future areas of improvement.

8. Eurobarometer study – further analysis carried out by LSE

G. Gaskell provided the group with some preliminary results from multivariate analyses of the Eurobarometer data. The group was generally very supportive of this work and looked forward to seeing further results at the next meeting.

9. Establishing a Framework for Communicating on Emerging Risks

T. Robinson, Head of EFSA's Emerging Risks Unit presented the Authority's work in this area. He explained the development of the process for the identification of emerging risks in the food chain; provided EFSA's definition of an emerging risk, then explained the emerging risk identification system and concluded with feedback from EFSA's 15th Colloquium on Emerging Risks in Food at which the European Commission raised several communication questions.

L. Smillie addressed the issue of communicating on emerging risks. She pointed out that at present, there is no dedicated communications strategy to guide EFSA's work in this area and that there is a need to establish such a strategy to meet partner and stakeholder expectations. She requested reference material from group members.

The group thanked T. Robinson for the interesting presentation as they were not familiar with EFSA's work in this area.

O. Renn had some questions about the framework and its focus on identifying hazards rather than identifying the sources of hazard generation and wondered if different areas of focus would be more relevant.
T. Robinson responded that new hazards in the food chain are rare but agreed that when this occurs, the consequences can be very severe.
The group discussed new exposure to existing hazards by new population groups, considering in particular vulnerable groups.

G. Gaskell commented that it may be worth exploring the parameters of this area of work, learning lessons from Foresight studies. He added that it would be interesting to have perspectives on this approach from the insurance industry and discuss the types of markers their industry uses in this field.

In conclusion, the group agreed that there is a need for a specific approach to communications in this area, focussing on process and monitoring and that EFSA should be cautious when communicating about individual substances. O. Renn referred to his work with the IGRC – emerging risks framework for genesis ITEC RISK (computer model).

Closure of the meeting

A-L Gassin thanked the group for their valuable contributions and confirmed that the next meeting will take place in Parma on Monday 24 October 2011.