European Food Safety Authority

COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTORATE

The European Food Safety Summit

The European Food Safety Summit, which was organised on 22nd November 2007 by EFSA jointly with the Portuguese Presidency and the European Commission, was a highlight of EFSA's Brussels week to celebrate the Fifth Anniversary of the European Food Safety Authority. The participation of over 300 representatives from Member States, EU Institutions, International Organizations and non-EU partner countries, together with stakeholder representatives from consumer organisations and NGOs, industry, retail, trade, producers and farmers, underlined the vital role that EFSA plays in the European food and feed safety system.

EFSA's goal is to deliver high quality scientific advice in a timely manner to the European Commission, the European Parliament and to Member States. The Summit provided an opportunity for key decision-makers and actors in the EU food safety system to reflect on experience gained over the past five years and to consider recommendations for the years ahead.

Some key highlights of the Summit were the following:

- EFSA has played a key role in providing independent scientific advice to decision-makers, underpinning risk management decisions and generating confidence in the European Union (EU) food safety system.
- The separation of risk assessment and risk management in the EU food safety system works
- EFSA's principles of scientific excellence, independence, transparency, openness, responsiveness and inclusiveness are essential to achieving its mission.
- The European Food Safety Summit was an excellent opportunity for EFSA stakeholders and EU and national representatives to reflect on EFSA's achievements during its first 5 years. EFSA has involved all interested parties in order to meet the needs and expectations of risk managers and stakeholders.

- Co-operation with Member States and competent authorities in Member States is crucial.
- It was widely acknowledged that there will be key scientific challenges for EFSA over the coming years in the areas of new technologies and nutrition.

New challenges – addressing new challenges and adapting to a new policy environment

- EFSA has to be flexible and adapt to changing conditions and new challenges, such as international trade, movement of people, climate change, new detection methods.
- Addressing the workload will be a great challenge for EFSA in the future as risk managers continue to ask for more risk assessments and priorities will have to be adjusted.
- There will be an increased role for science in new areas such as nutrition, animal health, environmental risk assessment of GMOs and Risk/benefit analysis.

Reinforcing co-operation - building on the networks already created

- Strengthening the interactions between risk assessors and risk managers – understanding each others' roles and responsibilities.
- Optimizing the co-operation between EFSA and national authorities through further collaborative work to harmonize risk assessment methodologies.
- Strengthening the presence of EFSA in the international arena.

Risk communication

- Communicating science with clear, understandable and simple messages.
- Addressing uncertainties and communicating the uncertainties.

- Close co-operation with risk managers and national food safety authorities in relation to communication.
- The importance of transparency and responsiveness in building trust

Further information on the main outcome of the Summit

From uncertainty to the gold standard of food safety

Jaime Silva, the Minister of Agriculture, Rural Development and Fisheries in Portugal, and current President of the EU Council, recapped EFSA's achievements by recalling the time when EFSA was created. Citizens had lost confidence and belief in the European food safety system. Food safety risks, such as BSE and dioxins in foods were on the agenda of public discussions. An independent food safety authority was set up as a logical outcome of this public debate. Today, European food safety standards are among the best in the world EFSA's scientific opinions on existing, potential and upcoming risks provide the basis for the decisions taken by European and national legislators.

Nevertheless, this is a paradox, as we have the privilege of living in a democratic society, a society that requires risk assessments, and calls for zero risk with their food. The public requires us to give them zero risk but a certain degree of risk always accompanies technical and scientific achievements. At the same time, we still have the challenge of providing the general public with sufficient insight into such a complex food safety system and how it works to benefit consumers.

The separation between risk assessment and risk management in the European Community food safety system has proven its worth and is the right way to tackle future challenges arising from existing and emerging technologies and the effects on food and feed safety from issues such as climate change and an ever-increasing globalised economy. We must still however strengthen the way we work and the scientific background and independence of risk assessment. At the same time, further cooperation between food safety agencies at national and international level must play a key role.

EFSA makes a difference

It all began with the Treaty of Rome in 1957. Fifty years of European cooperation also means fifty years of work towards food safety in Europe. However, as Markos

Kyprianou, former European Commissioner for Health, underlined in his keynote statement, it is also in the last five years that we had a tremendous input into achieving this safety through the work of EFSA which is celebrating its 5th Anniversary. The key drivers of food safety in Europe are the protection of the citizen and the functioning of the internal market. These two aspects have been realised via the EU food law framework, of which EFSA is an integral part. "EFSA is not a theoretical policy it is a policy which affects the everyday lives of EU citizens." The major achievement of the Authority is its holistic and integrated approach to risk assessment which spans the breadth of the entire food and feed chain and includes key related issues, such as animal health and welfare.

The challenge facing EFSA in the future will be its ability to cope with new food safety issues. It will be necessary to adopt new ideas and ways of working. New technologies such as cloning and nanotechnology, as well as issues such as climate change and obesity, will call for different approaches to food risk assessment.

One important step towards preparing for the future work load will be close cooperation with EU Member States and with other EU agencies. This can be achieved through the EFSA Advisory Forum and by cooperation and sharing of expertise between all relevant European agencies. This approach will be further reinforced by the Advisory Forum's cooperation strategy. If, however, EFSA is to continue to increase consumer confidence, it must remain independent and be genuinely perceived as independent by consumers.

Looking ahead

The Round Table of the Summit provided key representatives from the European Institutions, Member States, EFSA and its stakeholders with the opportunity to discuss "Food Safety in Europe: Past Achievements, Future Challenges". Chaired by Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle, the following public authorities and experts also participated in order of intervention: Carlos Agrela Pinheiro, the Portuguese Director General of Veterinary Service; Gert Lindemann, the German State Secretary for Food, Agriculture and Consumer Protection; Vittorio Silano, Chair of EFSA's Scientific Committee; Michel Barnier, French Minister for Agriculture and Fisheries; Sue Davies, Chair of EFSA's Stakeholder Consultative Platform; Robert Madelin, Director General of the Commission Directorate General for Health and Consumers ; Vittorio Prodi, Member of the European Parliament; Patrick Wall, Chair of EFSA's Management Board and António Nunes, Director of the Portuguese Economic and Food Safety Authority.

The further harmonisation and standardisation of procedures, methodologies and databases were seen as important steps towards enhancing food safety assessments. As an independent agency, EFSA will play a key role in this process. The Advisory Forum created a milestone by developing a joint cooperation strategy with Member States and its institutions. Pooling the wide scientific expertise available in Europe and beyond will further enhance both the quality and efficiency of EU risk assessments. Increased capability resulting from the adoption of the most recent technologies and leading edge research is another key issue in ensuring a proactive approach on the part of EFSA.

The improved ability of proactive initiatives was especially seen a key issue to identify and manage emerging risks. However, Round Table members also acknowledged the increasing importance of nutrition and healthy diets to address the growing problem of obesity. EFSA was seen as an active partner in the assessment of health claims, nutrient profiles and population reference intakes.

The participants at the Round Table underlined the need for a strong and independent EFSA providing independent scientific advice and communicating this advice independently in close co-operation with the EU risk managers (European Commission, European Parliament and Member States). Dialogue with stakeholders was also seen to be of key importance. The EFSA Stakeholder Consultative Platform plays an important role in dialogue with stakeholders and provides advice to EFSA on stakeholder matters. Consumer organisations, the food industry, farmers, retailers and non-governmental organisations are all active platform members.

The issue of uncertainty and “zero risk” was addressed by several speakers and members of the Round Table. There seems to be a certain expectation from the public for EU risk assessors and risk managers to ensure a zero risk in everything we eat. However, the round table recognised that there will always be some degree of risk. The real challenge for EFSA will be how to express uncertainty about a product that is basically safe. If we are unable to do this, we will not be able to move forward and embrace the new.

Communication with consumers was a key discussion topic in relation to improving consumer confidence in food safety, the degree of acceptability in European society for innovation in the food chain and improving the understanding of risk assessment and its role in supporting risk managers in addressing food safety issues. Close cooperation between scientific experts and communicators in presenting their results to the general public was seen as a unique achievement by EFSA. However, in addition to harmonising

key messages on food safety, allowances will also have to be made for the many different cultural interpretations or perceptions of risk between Europe's Member States in order to avoid widely differing and confusing views in risk assessment. The need for different risk communication strategies reflecting cultural and ethical differences will require cooperation with and between the Member States. Different views on risk assessment in Europe must be communicated and explained carefully against the background of differing economic, ecological, ethical and political views.

Many participants thought that one of the greatest challenges will be to maintain EFSA's high-quality working standards when dealing with EFSA's increasing workload from emerging risks and future challenges. EFSA must develop the structures and continue to effectively manage resources to deal with an increasing future workload. EFSA is in a good position to build on the important achievements of the last five years. Thanks to the EU food safety system that is already firmly in place, European consumers are among the best protected and informed in the world. EFSA always aims to present its risk assessment advice to risk managers and wider audiences in an appropriate, helpful, understandable and timely manner. In this way, EFSA constantly co-operates and engages with risk managers on the relevance and impact that its risk assessment work might have on risk management decisions. As an independent source of scientific advice on food safety, EFSA looks forward to playing a key role together with the European institutions, Member States and all other stakeholders in facing the future challenges of the EU food safety system.

In closing the Food Safety Summit, Zofija Mazej Kukovič, the Slovenian Minister of Public Health, concluded that EFSA is of vital importance and, through its activities of the last five years, has created a high degree of confidence in what it does. . Minister Mazej Kukovič, said that she looked forward to working closely together with EFSA under the Slovenian European Union Presidency and to nurturing the seeds that now have been sown.