

**Speech delivered by EU Commissioner for Health Mrs  
Vassiliou to EFSA staff**

**Parma, 16 October 2009**

Colleagues,

I am delighted to have the opportunity to meet you all again today - this time, in a more informal setting.

I would like to use this occasion to take stock of the progress we have made together on food safety as the current mandate of the European Commission gradually comes to a close.

As Commissioner for Health, one of my main priorities is to maintain and, whenever possible, enhance the high level of food safety we have in the European Union and to ensure we react decisively, swiftly and appropriately to any threats that may arise.

As you are aware, the foundations of the European food safety system were laid in the aftermath of the series of food crises of the early 1990s.

This led us to put in place strong, comprehensive measures to overhaul, streamline and modernise our European food safety system.

We recognised the urgent need to build a new model of food safety fit for the demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and to rebuild battered public confidence.

I am proud that the European Union now has one of the highest levels of food safety in the world.

This has been achieved largely thanks to the comprehensive body of EU legislation in place (such as the general food law Regulation), the introduction of the "farm to fork" principle and the robust scientific advice of EFSA - to which each and every one of you contributes.

During my first visit here last year, I emphasized how highly I value the role of EFSA as a vital partner to ensure the safety of the food chain. I would like to reiterate this point today.

EFSA was set up seven years ago to help boost the Community's capabilities in addressing the complex scientific issues that lie at the heart of food safety – an issue which concerns all Europeans.

EFSA is a central scientific component of the new European food safety system. Its establishment marked an important shift in the way the Commission obtains the scientific information it needs before taking important decisions on food safety.

EFSA has now established itself as a well-respected authority, recognised both inside and outside the EU for the quality of its scientific work.

Since my last visit, EFSA has successfully responded to a large number of requests from the Commission. I understand this has not been an easy task.

But time and again, EFSA has proven its capacity to deliver scientific opinions that the Community needs to underpin its legislation.

A recent example is the publication of the first series of scientific opinions on health claims. But I also think of the enormous amount of work carried out in the important areas of pesticides, GMOs, nutrition-related activities and flavourings.

In the past year, we have had to tackle a series of challenges and risks to the food chain. I do not need to remind anyone here of the melamine-contaminated milk from China or the case of dioxins in Irish pork.

EFSA's role in providing scientific advice speedily has been pivotal in our efforts to deal with these issues.

EFSA is an essential partner in our efforts to ensure that the food we eat is safe. As partners, I believe that we have managed to strike the right balance between collaboration and independence.

We have worked hard together to ensure better planning and priority setting in order to reach critical deadlines.

In this respect, I am pleased that roadmaps have been agreed in the sensitive areas of pesticides and GMOs. This level of efficiency is essential as late scientific opinions may have serious implications.

The good relationship that exists between the Commission services and EFSA staff has proved fruitful. And here I must highlight our cooperation in the area of health claims.

However, I believe there is still room for even closer cooperation, particularly for sensitive issues such as new technologies (cloning, nanotechnology), and GMOs. And I am grateful for the productive discussions we had on these important issues this morning.

Risk perception is a particularly important factor in the area of new technologies which must be taken into account at the risk management and risk communication phases.

When we are under public scrutiny, as we are for GMOs, the public does not rely on expert judgement as such. The rationale that underlies the safety assessment has to be explained better. We therefore cannot underestimate the important role of risk communication.

Collaboration with Member States is also essential to promote synergies, to avoid duplication of efforts and to ensure that our messages communicated to consumers are coherent.

Communication is equally important between yourselves and your sister agencies such as the European Centre for Disease Control, the European Medicines Agency, and the European Chemicals Agency, so that synergies can be exploited.

Allow me now take a brief look at the challenges that lie ahead. There are two which merit particular attention.

The first is actually not new but was, is and will remain a challenge for EFSA. This is the quality of scientific advice. I firmly believe this is the cornerstone of the success of EFSA.

EFSA's credibility is essential and the objectivity and scientific quality of the opinions are paramount.

The second challenge concerns the importance of building synergies and avoiding duplication in the fields of data collection and analysis and emerging risks.

EFSA has a key preventive role to play in the area of data collection and analysis. The work you have already accomplished in this area is, of course, of utmost importance for the quality of the risk assessment.

But it also provides risk managers with essential data on the trends affecting the safety of the food chain.

The zoonoses report that EFSA delivers each year in collaboration with ECDC and the EFSA report on pesticides residues are an illustration of the pivotal role you play.

EFSA's work on the collection of significant data on food consumption and food composition has effectively supported the evolution of food law in the field of nutrition. It is also paramount for the robustness of the risk assessment.

You are also making good progress in the new area of emerging risks.

Different actors play a key role in this area: EFSA, EuroSTAT, SANCO and the Member States.

I therefore believe it is important to work shoulder-to-shoulder with a mutual respect of our different roles and functions.

Colleagues,

It will be an honour for me to witness the laying of the first stone tomorrow for the new building that will house EFSA in the future. I hope it will be finished soon and that you will enjoy working in this new environment.

I am fully aware of your heavy workload and I know it is not always easy to meet the many requests you receive. So I would like to take this opportunity today to thank you personally for your commitment, motivation and professionalism.

I would also like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the leadership of Catherine Geslain-Lanelle, and to thank her for the good cooperation that we enjoy.

Thank you all very much.

**End**  
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