

REPORT

Seminar on Handling Food Emergencies/Crises in the Food Chain 14/15 October 2010, Parma, Italy

Introduction:

The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) aims to forge closer ties with countries to the South and East of the EU. Through this policy, the EU seeks to promote greater economic development, stability and better governance in its neighbourhood.

Aims of the seminar: The workshop informed the participating countries on how to handle a food crisis. It explained the respective roles of the risk assessor, the risk communicator and the risk manager in the EU. The seminar mentioned in particular the tasks of DG SANCO, the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) and EU Member States in the event of a food crisis. Furthermore, the functioning of the Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed (RASFF) was illustrated. The participating countries reported on their existing crises handling systems.

The workshop was organised and financed by the TAIEX programme of the European Commission in co-operation with EFSA, DG SANCO and DG RELEX for the 10 Mediterranean countries of the EU Neighbouring countries (ENP countries).

The seminar was the first regional seminar between the EU food safety bodies and the Mediterranean ENP countries food safety authorities and the audience consisted of 3-6 high level experts per country with a total of 42 experts.

Hubert Deluyker, Director of Scientific Cooperation and Assistance, EFSA welcomed the participants to the Palazzo Ducale in Parma, provided a brief insight into the process of setting up of EFSA and in addition shared more information on establishing of the EFSA's Emerging Risk Unit with responsibility in coordination of food emergencies. He reiterated the importance of EFSA Expert Database project and invited concerned experts from the ENP partner countries to join the database. Mr. Deluyker, furthermore answered many questions raised by representatives from Jordan, Egypt, Morocco and Lebanon.

In continuation, *Nicolas Lilienthal* from the European Commission, DG ELARG, presented the role of TAIEX and the possible benefits for ENP partner countries, providing more information on legal basis, objectives and main forms of financial assistance. He encouraged representatives from the ENP beneficiary countries to apply for TAIEX funds for the year 2011.

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After the break, *Andrea Gervelmeyer* from the Emerging Risk Unit in EFSA, talked about the crisis preparedness activities, crisis handling procedures and resources for handling urgent advice by EFSA with information on the new structures and the new 2 response levels approach. She stressed the importance of clear and timely communication between EFSA and the European Commission, the Member States and the stakeholders.

In continuation *Wolf-Martin Maier*, *DG SANCO*, *European Commission*, gave an overview of the crisis management mechanisms at EU-level and explained the role of the European Commission. He presented existing procedures and tools and gave several practical examples, e.g. bioterrorism exercise coordinated by DG SANCO, and informed on the different early warning systems in the EU.

The next speaker was *José Luis de Felipe Gardón*, *DG SANCO*, *European Commission*, who gave a comprehensive insight into the Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed (RASFF) and explained the role of the European Commission. In addition, he presented the new IT platform and the new RASFF web portal and paid a particular attention to the cooperation with third countries facilitated by the RASFF Window. Finally the speaker informed about the possibility of providing technical assistance, trainings and workshops on this topic.

Philippe Houdart, the Head of the Crises Unit at the Belgium Food Safety Agency gave a general overview on 'How to tackle crises at national level', stressing the importance of flexible crisis structure and well prepared collaborators, early detection, and a step by step approach. The speaker shared his views and gave a critical analysis of the two food crises episodes, one of 1999 (PCB and dioxins) and the other of 2006 (dioxin incident with the contamination of gelatin and animal fat), pointing out the positive and negative elements and lessons learned on how the authorities handled those crises.

His speech was followed by *Sylvia de Jong* from the Federal Office of Consumer Protection and Food Safety in Germany, who presented the Member State perspective of RASFF. She gave an informative overview of legal basis and distribution of responsibilities between institutions involved at national and regional level. The speaker used the example of *Listeria monocytogenes* in cheese in order to present how the RASFF system can serve the authorities in responding to a food crisis.

In continuation, each of the 10 ENP countries explained its food safety legal basis and institutional structures, and in addition presented their preparedness and procedures in a crises situation. They all have established a crisis plan and most of them are actively involved in the EU RASFF Window application interface (Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Syria and Tunisia).

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As a sum up of the first day it was concluded that different countries have different perception of food crises. Beside the setting up of government infrastructure for reacting in food safety emergency, which was defined of overriding importance, the establishment and maintenance of communication channels and networks between competent institutions, stakeholders and general public was stressed as crucial as well.

The European Commission and EFSA are ready to provide support in order to address the needs and shortages in resources of the ENP partner countries when food safety emergencies are in question.

The second day started with a presentation by *Laura Smillie*, Senior communication adviser, EFSA Communication Directorate, who provided an overview of EFSA work in the risk communication. She used a practical example of *bisphenol A* in order to highlight the importance of timely information sharing and provision of consistent messages to all interested parties and the public at large during the whole period of a crisis.

The next speaker was *Raymond Ellard*, Director of Audit & Compliance at the Food Safety Authority of Ireland who gave a presentation on experiences with handling crises and provided examples from a case study on dioxin offering more information on several practical manuals and particular crisis handling procedures like Code of Practices, Guidelines for Product Recall and Crises Management Plan.

Jeffrey Moon, Scientific Committee and Advisory Forum of EFSA, facilitated the crisis exercise. After being introduced with the basic elements of the exercise, the participants were divided in 6 groups, where each group appointed a rapporteur. The exercise consisted of 4 stages of a fictitious food safety incident. The participants worked through each phase sharing ideas on handling the scenario and discussing how they would react in a real emergency situation.

The exercise ended with a discussion where it was concluded that food incidents are characterised by complexity and unpredictability. In addition, the perception of risk in different country situations makes the classification of food incidents even more difficult. Furthermore, it was noted that in order to achieve the protection of consumers it is often necessary to act even where there is a lack of scientific certainty, hence it is crucial to establish efficient communication channels both on national and on international level. The exercise proved to be beneficial for all parties involved. It reflected a possible real scenario and created a platform for networking between the ENP partner countries and the EU representatives.

The seminar was chaired by *Finn Sheye* from Legal and Policy Affairs Unit, EFSA on the first day and by *José Luis de Felipe Gardón* from European Commission, DG SANCO, on the second day.

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An evaluation questionnaire that was distributed to all participants during the course of the seminar gave the following feedback:

There were a total of 42 representatives of the competent authorities in the 10 Mediterranean ENP countries who attended the workshop. 36 participants replied to the evaluation questionnaire. Responses to the questions regarding presentation skills of the speakers, the content of speeches and responsiveness to the questions showed that the majority of the participants were very satisfied. **72 %** of the participants found presentations being on the right level and **80 %** of the participants felt they had enough opportunity to express their opinion. The majority of the participants (**72%**) considered that this seminar was an excellent or very good opportunity for improving their knowledge on this topic. When asked to assess the overall value of the seminar the majority of the participants, **75 %** stated the overall value of the seminar was excellent or very good while **19 %** considered it to be good.

Conclusions and future prospective:

On one hand, the seminar gave the EFSA and the European Commission Services a good possibility to initiate closer cooperation with the food safety authorities in the Mediterranean ENP countries, and on the other, the beneficiary countries got an insight into the European Union system on crisis handling and also into possibility for them to take an active part in the EU RASFF system.

The seminar provided a good platform for networking and gave good indications for the future cooperation.

As a follow up, the participants will receive a CD with all the material from the seminar and EFSA will continue sharing information on the EU food safety via a mailing list of the ENP countries that is been regularly updated.

The scientist in the ENP countries were invited to join EFSA's expert database and the participants will receive further information on this via the created network.

TAIEX invited the participants to apply for available assistance, e.g. expert missions to the ENP countries, workshop and seminars in the ENP countries and study visits in the EU Member States, as TAIEX has possibilities to support such initiatives under the European Neighbourhood Policy Instrument.

EFSA will, in close cooperation with DG SANCO, DG ELARG and DG RELEX look further into possibilities to organise similar seminar on food safety issues and it is foreseen that a multicounty programme will be set up in 2011 for the cooperation between the European agencies and the Neighbourhood countries following the best practices from the IPA Programme under the EU Enlargement policy.

Enclosed, in the Annex I the agenda for the seminar, and in the Annex II the list of possible additional topics for future seminars that has been defined by participants during the course of the seminar.

Seminar on Handling Food Emergencies/Crises in the Food Chain
14/15 October 2010, Parma, Italy

AGENDA

Thursday, 14 October 2010

Chair : Finn Sheye, Legal and Policy Affairs Unit, EFSA

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|----------------------|--|
| 09.00 - 09.30 | Registration |
| 09.30 – 09.40 | Welcome <i>Hubert Deluyker (Director of Scientific Cooperation and Assistance, EFSA)</i> |
| 09.40 – 10.00 | TAIEX instrument of the European Commission <i>Nicolas Lilienthal (DG Enlargement, European Commission)</i> |
| 10.00 – 10.30 | Coffee break |
| 10.30 – 11.00 | Handling of food emergencies/crises – preparedness and procedures at the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) <i>Andrea Gervelmeyer (Emerging Risks Unit, EFSA)</i> |
| 11.00 – 11.30 | Handling of food emergencies/crises – preparedness and procedures at EU level <i>Wolf-Martin Maier (DG SANCO, European Commission)</i> |
| 11.30 – 12.00 | Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed (RASFF) – an essential tool <i>José Luis de Felipe Gardón (DG SANCO, European Commission)</i> |
| 12.00 – 13.30 | Lunch |
| 13.30 – 14.00 | Handling of food emergencies/crises – preparedness and procedures in EU Member States <i>Philippe Houdart (Director prevention and management crises of the Belgian Food Authorities, Belgium)</i> |
| 14.00 – 14.30 | RASFF – perspective of a EU Member State <i>Sylvia de Jong (Federal Office of Consumer Protection and Food Safety, Germany)</i> |

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|----------------------|--|
| 14.30 – 14.45 | Handling of food emergencies/crises – preparedness and procedures in Algeria |
| 14.45 - 15.00 | Handling of food emergencies/crises – preparedness and procedures in Egypt |
| 15.00 – 15.15 | Handling of food emergencies/crises – preparedness and procedures in Israel |
| 15.15 – 15.30 | Handling of food emergencies/crises – preparedness and procedures in Jordan |
| 15.30 – 16.00 | <i>Coffee break</i> |
| 16.00 – 16.15 | Handling of food emergencies/crises – preparedness and procedures in Morocco |
| 16.15 – 16.30 | Handling of food emergencies/crises – preparedness and procedures in Lebanon |
| 16.30 – 16.45 | Handling of food emergencies/crises – preparedness and procedures in Libya |
| 16.45 – 17.00 | Handling of food emergencies/crises – preparedness and procedures in the Occupied Palestinian Territory |
| 17.00 – 17.15 | Handling of food emergencies/crises – preparedness and procedures in Syria |
| 17.15 – 17.30 | Handling of food emergencies/crises – preparedness and procedures in Tunisia |
| 17.30 – 18.00 | Discussion |
| 20.00 | Dinner |

End of Day I

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Friday, 15 October 2010

Chair : José Luis de Felipe Gardón, European Commission, DG SANCO

- 9.00 – 09.30** **Risk communication - examples**
Laura Smillie (Communication Directorate, EFSA)
- 9.30 – 10.00** **Case study – cooked meats**
Raymond Ellard (Director of Audit & Compliance, Food Safety Authority, Ireland)
- 10.00 – 10.10** **Introduction to emergency/crisis exercise**
Jeffrey Moon, (Scientific Committee and Advisory Forum, EFSA)
- 10.10 – 10.30** **Coffee Break**
- 10.30 – 12.30** **Emergency/crisis exercise**
Jeffrey Moon (Scientific Committee and Advisory Forum, EFSA)
- 12.30 – 13.00** **Plenum discussion on the exercise**
- 13.00 – 13.30** **Conclusions**

End

This meeting is being organised by the

**Technical Assistance Information Exchange Instrument
of the European Commission**

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Additional topics suggested by the participants for future seminars:

- Details on EU legislation on Food Safety
- Risk assessment procedures – market surveillance
- Workshop on food safety especially on HACCP and traceability
- Workshop on food safety due to new advisory committee in Libya including Libya, Tunisia, Algiers, Morocco. Preferable in the near future.
- Meeting on south – south cooperation (between the North African countries) and technical support from EFSA
- Risk assessment and risk management
- More crises cases and more exercise + Maghreb wide crises exercise
- More Food safety topics for the ENP countries
- The relationship between the different agencies involved in food safety
- High level participation from the ENP countries in workshops to create better awareness about communication needs and better actions.
- Risk assessment per product

Comments/suggestions to improve the future seminars:

- Many commented on that the meeting took place far from the hotel.
- Thanks for valuable information from many participants.
- The workshop should have been over 2 ½ or better 3 days.
- More case studies.
- RASFF DVD to all participants.
- More cooperation possibilities between the Mediterranean ENP countries
- More cooperation between EFSA and the ENP countries