

Moving together

NEWS ON EUROPEAN FOOD SAFETY CO-OPERATION

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Dear readers,

Co-operation between EU Member States and EFSA is key to the overall success of the European food safety system and to increased consumer confidence. Resources can be allocated more appropriately, work programmes coordinated more efficiently and activities performed more economically. This type of work promotes clear and consistent information and increases the coherence of scientific risk assessments.

EFSA and the Member States have already started several co-operation initiatives and the number is increasing. They include scientific co-operation and communication projects. This newsletter is intended to give you an overview on current co-operation projects and to keep you updated on the results and milestones achieved.



Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle,
EFSA Executive Director

EFSA co-operation strategy a multiple-path approach

The major link between EFSA and the national food safety authorities of the EU Member States is represented by the Advisory Forum.

A milestone in EFSA's co-operation with the Member States was its work on developing a roadmap for scientific co-operation. In September 2006, members of the Advisory Forum signed a "Declaration of Intent" with the aim of strengthening information exchange on risk assessment and risk communications in Europe. In December 2006 this was followed by the adoption by the Management Board of EFSA's Strategy for Scientific Co-operation and Communication. The strategy identified four cornerstones:

- The establishment of systems for collecting and rapidly exchanging scientific data between the Member States and EFSA. This leads to more efficient scientific co-operation.
- The sharing of best risk assessment practices so that more coherent risk management strategies can be developed.
- The harmonisation of methodologies for risk assessment. This enhances confidence in all scientific assessments conducted throughout Europe.
- The promotion of coherence in risk communications. This inspires greater consumer confidence.

Implementation of the co-operation strategy already has started. Established in March 2007, a Steering Group on Co-operation (SGC) now guides the scientific co-operation programme. Composed of Members of the Advisory Forum, representatives of the Scientific Committee and EFSA staff, its overall role is to support the implementation of the strategy for co-operation and networking and help map out an effective system for decision-making on proposed joint projects. The Steering Group evaluates and prioritises projects, considers terms of

reference for the proposed projects and possible participants, provides feedback both to the Advisory Forum and the Scientific Committee and advises EFSA on possible areas of focus in co-operation for the next 5-10 years.

To date, five EFSA Scientific Co-operation (ESCO) working groups have received a mandate for "ESCO projects" (see page 5). A working group on communications established in 2003 will further strengthen its working practices to ensure greater consistency and coherence in food safety information (see page 5).

National Focal Points - EFSA's "ambassadors" in the Member States

"National Focal Points" are now set up to further strengthen the co-operation with the Member States. The national Focal Points serve as a relay contact between risk managers, national authorities, research institutes, stakeholders and consumers in the Member States. Such points ensure the adequate and timely two-way exchange of all relevant information.

The role of such focal points is also to keep EFSA and Advisory Forum Members informed of national risk assessment and science developments. The network of Focal Points will coordinate communications with risk assessment institutes in the Member States and will be closely involved in Work Programmes conducted by EFSA and by national authorities.

> FOR MORE INFORMATION:

On the focal points:
http://www.efsa.europa.eu/EFSA/1178620777517/efsa_locale-1178620753812_National_Focal_Points.htm



< *Signing of the Focal Point agreement with the Italian Segretariato Nazionale della Valutazione del Rischio della Catena Alimentare identifying the Istituto Superiore di Sanità as the Focal Point in Italy in October 2007.*



Ambitious projects such as the co-operation strategy introduced by EFSA are brought to life by the dedicated people who move them forward. "Moving together" spoke with some key persons about their views and motivations on the co-operation strategy.



> **Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle**

Executive Director of the European Food Safety Authority

“Co-operation with the national agencies is a top priority for EFSA”

? **What are your expectations towards national institutions?**

> **Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle** To deliver the best risk assessments for Europe, EFSA has to have access to scientific information and data available at the national and international levels. By sharing information and being well informed about each other's activities, we can move towards a more common understanding of the risks that exist at national and EU level. This enables us to assist risk managers, develop more coherent strategies and avoid duplication of effort in risk assessment. The coherence of risk communications across the Community improves. Co-operation with the national agencies is therefore a top priority for EFSA.

? **How will European consumers benefit from the co-operation strategy?**

> Consumers will benefit from more coherent advice given to risk managers. It is important that consumers are not faced with conflicting information on food issues. EFSA is seeking to develop greater consistency and coherence in food safety information and messages. Therefore, EFSA has created a working group of its Advisory Forum, bringing together the heads of communications of the national food agencies and the European Commission. We are also increasing our existing practice of notifying national bodies, stakeholders and international partners with information on our key opinions and reports in advance.

> **Prof. Vittorio Silano** *chairman of EFSA's Scientific Committee*

“A European consensus approach in risk assessment will benefit all of us”

? **You have over 30 years of experience in scientific co-operation. What has changed in the last few years?**

> **Prof. Vittorio Silano** The major step forward in risk assessment co-operation was the establishment of EFSA. Never before did we, as scientists, have a structure like EFSA supporting us as a permanent secretariat and co-ordination body. EFSA, with its solid structure and its effective assistance in providing tools, literature and databases, makes work for scientists in the Scientific Committee, Panels and Working Groups faster and much more efficient.

? **What are the benefits of the new structure?**

> Now, for the first time, we have experts designated by Member States directly participating in *ad hoc* working groups together with experts designated by the Scientific Committee and Panels. This is very beneficial.

? **What are the next important steps?**

> We need to achieve a broad consensus on risk assessment methodologies in order to avoid unnecessary contradictory results which may affect consumers' confidence. A European, consensual approach in risk assessment will benefit all of us.



> Dr. Herman Koëter *EFSA Director of Science and Deputy Executive Director*

“The new approach will speed up the scientific process”



? How will the co-operation projects contribute to EFSA's scientific work?

> Dr. Herman Koëter Involving experts from the Member States gives us access to additional scientific expertise and resources. This will help us to better handle the workload EFSA is confronted with and to speed up the scientific process. Working together also ensures that a common understanding of the problem is developed at the very beginning, and that a harmonised approach is achieved.

? How are the new EFSA Scientific Co-operation working groups (ESCO) connected with the other scientific units of EFSA?

> Once a mandate for an ESCO working group is adopted by the Advisory Forum and the Scientific Committee, the group is then formed by experts from the Scientific Committee, EFSA expert staff and experts from the Member States who have a particular interest in a specific scientific issue. Based on the mandate, the working group develops a comprehensive report on the issue which is submitted to EFSA's Executive Director. EFSA Management may then decide that the report could provide very valuable input to the scientific committee or appropriate panel in developing its opinions. With this multi-step-procedure, we ensure that national know-how, views and approaches are taken into account at a very early stage, whilst ensuring that opinions issued by EFSA are independent of any national interest.

> Prof. Dr. Dr. Andreas Hensel *President of the Federal Institute for Risk Assessment (BfR), Germany*

“Harmonising of risk assessment will result in more transparency in risk analysis”

? What are the main benefits to Member States and their national food safety authorities?

> Prof. Dr. Dr. Andreas Hensel The joint goal of the BfR and its European sister organisations is to provide optimal protection for the consumer. To accomplish this target, great emphasis is placed on excellence in scientific risk assessment in the area of food safety. Additional co-operation with a European institution, in this case EFSA, has the primary function of gathering scientific expertise within Europe. This enables not only the exchange of information, but also allows the possibility of carrying out open and pinpointed discussions as well as collective decision-making.

? What do you see as the most important projects?

> One of the several important projects of EFSA's Advisory Forum is harmonising risk assessment procedures within and between the Member States. Many international organisations have already designed activities in this area. These harmonising projects have resulted in the heightened coherence of assessments carried out in national, European and international scientific panels. However, there are still discrepancies in risk assessment conclusions, in data used to determine exposure and in the interpretation of data, which is, in part, due to differences in models utilised. I am especially supportive of the harmonising of projects, as they result in more transparency in risk analysis.



Current EFSA co-operation projects

The co-operation strategy already is in action: five Scientific Co-operation working groups have begun their work. In this issue, "Moving together" briefly introduces the first co-operation projects. Future issues will highlight results and milestones and will present newly established ESCO projects.

ESCO working group on emerging risks

Identification of emerging risks is one of the main tasks assigned to EFSA. Most recently, the Scientific Committee adopted an operational definition of an "emerging risk" so as to highlight the differences between "emerging risks", "emergency responses" and "risk assessments" under crisis conditions.

The present mandate for the ESCO working group on emerging risks focuses on the appropriate "indicators" of such risks.

In order ultimately to establish a European-wide network of key sources, the working group will identify sources and best practices for the collection and updating of data relevant to indicators. The collection, analysis and evaluation of such data will be highlighted as a final step in identifying emerging risks and in making decisions on necessary investigations.

Since communication is a key task of EFSA, the project extends beyond pure science and its mandate involves the development of procedures for the communication of emerging risks. This serves to avoid unnecessary concern as well as possible underestimation.

The working group consists of 13 experts nominated by Member States plus 9 experts nominated by EFSA's panels. The working group had its first meeting in September 2007.

ESCO working group on fostering harmonised risk assessment approaches in Member States

Activities of several international organisations have already led to a high degree of concurrence in regard to methodologies for hazard identification and characterisation, for exposure assessment and for risk characterisation. However, differences between assessments still remain and these may be due to dissimilarities in datasets considered, target populations evaluated, or data interpretation. To reveal such differences, a high degree of transparency in risk assessment is necessary. Further harmonisation of risk assessment methodologies also aids the development of high-quality scientific opinions recognised as authoritative both within and outside the EU.

The ESCO working group on the Harmonisation of Risk Assessment approaches therefore will collect existing guidelines, guidance and quality management documents of EFSA and of the Member States on risk assessment practices. Ultimately, specific methodologies or approaches for risk assessment that require further harmonisation at EU level shall be identified and applied.



Focus

Advisory Forum Working Group on Communications

The Communications Working Group cooperates with national food safety agencies to communicate risks in the food chain. Established in 2003, the Working Group promotes the coherence of food safety messages across the EU. The Communications Working Group meets regularly to remain abreast on planned communication initiatives from EFSA and the national bodies, to exchange best practices and to develop common approaches.

In this Working Group, communication initiatives of EFSA, such as the "Moving together" newsletter are first presented and discussed. Ongoing communications activities by EFSA and Member States are evaluated in order to identify lessons learned and to develop best practices for the benefit of all.

Specific topics of risk perception and communication are discussed at regular meetings or as special workshops. In a recent meeting, case studies were analysed to develop common strategies to address inaccurate food safety information.

The key for a common communication approach is the exchange of information on all communication issues. Authorities in Member States therefore are pre-notified of press releases issued by EFSA under embargo. This then allows members to prepare as required for further communications adapted to the needs of consumers in the Member States



ESCO working group on the analysis of risk and benefits of fortification of food with folic acid

Across the EU, the prevalence of neural tube defects (NTD) is approximately 1 per 1,000 births. Due to different systems of collecting information on congenital anomalies and to different policies of terminating pregnancies on antenatal screening, there is a wide difference in prevalence rates of NTDs in Member States. The benefits of folic acid in preventing NTDs are well established and have clearly been demonstrated in countries that have introduced mandatory food fortification. Across the EU, various public health initiatives are underway that aim to address food fortification with folic acid to reduce the incidence of NTDs. Mandatory fortification of bread is recommended in Ireland and the United Kingdom and is under consideration in Germany but is not recommended in Sweden. The UK has recently decided to review risks associated with colon cancer in the elderly and dietary folic acid prior to proceeding with mandatory fortification.

Recently, data have emerged that suggests a link between folic acid and the risk of colon cancer in the elderly. Within this context, the ESCO working group will review current practices in Member States regarding the voluntary fortification of foods as well as current guidance on safe upper levels of folic acid for all population groups. The working group also will review the scientific basis for guidance on voluntary addition of folic acid to foods and food supplements. Plans to organise an international meeting on folic acid and cancer are advancing and this meeting would be hosted by the Swedish National Food Administration. The outcomes from this ESCO working group could feed into a possible opinion from EFSA on risk assessment and cancer.

Harmonisation of chemical occurrence data collection in food and feed

Exposure assessment is a key step in the risk assessment process central to the activities of EFSA. The quality of such assessments depends on the quality of the data input and on methodologies used.

Efforts to harmonise the collection of food consumption data are already made by the EFSA Network of Food Consumption Database Managers.

Within the new ESCO project, a Network of Managers of Chemical Occurrence Data is to be established to interface with the existing network. This network

would contribute to the shared development of a European framework for the collection and storage of chemical occurrence data in food. Such a framework would facilitate European-wide trend analyses and the identification of emerging issues.

The network will review priorities in the collection of occurrence data on chemical substances in food, feed and beverages and will identify available resources and best practices in the generation or collection of chemical occurrence data. The working group also will develop and advise on procedures and best practices in accessing, collecting, evaluating and using such data. Within the next two years, general principles will be developed for the EU-wide collection of data on chemical substances in food, beverages and feed.

Setting up a database of scientific experts in Europe to assist EFSA in its scientific work in the area of risk assessments in food and feed safety

To deliver the best science at the right time and in the most appropriate manner, the effective pooling of the wide scientific excellence available in Europe is necessary. EFSA therefore will cooperate with members of the Advisory Forum in setting up a database of scientific experts who could make themselves available for *ad hoc* assistance in defined projects. This database will be established through individual online applications made by experts from the Member States supported by their national governmental authorities in the area of food and feed safety, plant health and protection and animal health and welfare. The database will also include experts previously or currently working in the Scientific Panels, in the Scientific Committee and various working groups.

The expert database will become a living database and will be updated regularly. EFSA will also publish information on its own scientific activities in which these experts are involved.

The establishment of the expert database should enable EFSA and members of the Advisory Forum to increase their ability to conduct risk assessments in the area of food and feed. It also would help EFSA to respond more effectively to its growing workload, particularly in cases of emerging or crisis situations in which unexpected or urgent work is required. Strong co-operation between Member States and EFSA is key to the overall success and effectiveness of the European food safety system and, ultimately, to increased consumer protection and confidence.



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The views or positions expressed in this newsletter do not necessarily represent in legal terms the official position of the European Food Safety Authority

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News on EFSA's co-operation projects can also be found at the EFSA website at www.efsa.europa.eu. In particular at the following address:

http://www.efsa.europa.eu/EFSA/PartnersNetworks/efsa_locale-1178620753812_ScientificCooperation.htm

Core documents including scientific opinions, agendas and minutes of meetings can be found here.