

Feature

Engaging with Member States through EFSA's Advisory Forum

EFSA's Advisory Forum stands testament to the Authority's commitment to involve European Union Member States in its work. Recently EFSA's ongoing work to harmonise methodologies for assessing the safety of botanicals and botanical preparations intended for use as food supplements, underlined the key role the Advisory Forum has to play.

The Advisory Forum connects EFSA with the national food safety authorities of all 27 EU Member States. Its members represent each national body responsible for risk assessment in the EU. There are also observers from Norway, Iceland, Switzerland, candidate countries and the European Commission. The Forum is at the heart of EFSA's collaborative approach to working with EU Member States. Through it, EFSA and the Member States can join forces in addressing European risk assessment and risk communications issues. Collaboration between EFSA and national food safety authorities on botanicals, is a case in point.

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The example of botanicals

Botanicals and derived preparations (from plants, algae, fungi or lichens) are widely available on the EU market as food supplements. Examples include ginkgo, garlic, St. John's Wort and ginseng. Such products are typically labeled as natural foods, often claiming to have possible health benefits.

But are there some risks for human health? This is where EFSA stepped in. In 2004 an EFSA discussion paper expressed concerns about the quality and safety of botanicals. This led members of the Advisory Forum to underline the need for science-based guidance for assessing the safety of botanicals. EFSA responded and took the initiative to work on this issue. It has already developed draft guidance proposing a science-based approach for assessing the safety of botanicals, and has compiled a compendium of botanicals that have been reported to contain toxic, addictive, psychotropic or other substances that may be of concern. EFSA held public consultations on these documents in early 2008.

Future developments

It was suggested to test the proposed approach with a number of examples. An EFSA Scientific Co-operation (ESCO), working group was therefore created, involving experts nominated both by the Advisory Forum and EFSA's Scientific Committee.

The working group has also been enlarging the information in the compendium. The Steering Group on Co-operation (SGC), in which Advisory Forum members participate alongside members of the Scientific Committee, has been monitoring progress of this working group, as with all EFSA working groups.

The ESCO working group delivered a report of its findings to EFSA's Executive Director in April 2009. The outcome was presented to the SGC mid May, to the Scientific Committee end of May, and to the Advisory Forum mid June 2009. The report contains some recommendations for updating the guidance document, which are currently being considered by the Scientific Committee, and possible follow-up actions that could be undertaken by EFSA.

The updated guidance document, the compendium and ESCO report will all be available on the EFSA website soon. ■

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Interview

Co-operation on key topics with Member States: Special Advisory Forum meeting on plant health

> **Riitta Maijala**, *EFSA's Director of Risk Assessment*

? Why did the Advisory Forum meet to discuss plant health specifically?



> **Riitta Maijala** In 2008, EFSA, in line with its strategy on collaboration with Member States, put this strategy into practice by organising special Advisory Forum meetings focusing on specific areas, namely plant health, as well as animal health and welfare. The overall aim was closer networking

between relevant national experts so that they could get together to help set priorities and streamline the work of EFSA and national authorities.

In October 2008, 20 national plant health experts of EFSA's Advisory Forum came together with counterparts from EFSA and the European Commission. The focus was on harmonising approaches for pest risk assessments (PRAs) and their evaluation, and discussing what data is needed for different types of risk assessments.

? What benefits did the meeting bring?

> On a more general note, the meeting allowed participants to share scientific information, pool resources and work towards coordinating work programmes. Specifically, it served as a platform for participants to agree on the need to harmonise pest risk assessment methods, since existing guidelines were developed under different frameworks. Here, EFSA's guidance document for evaluating PRAs, which it is about to publish, will prove particularly useful. At the meeting participants also learned of, and welcomed, EFSA's initiative in putting together an inventory of data sources for PRAs which will be also available soon.

? Will these special Advisory Forum meetings continue?

> Indeed, they will. We see these focused meetings as important drivers to ensuring Member States and EFSA are kept abreast of the latest developments throughout Europe. They are also vital to maintaining a coherent approach across Europe in specific areas. To this end, Advisory Forum representatives on plant health will come together again in October 2009. ■



EU co-operation in action: The Community Zoonoses Summary Report

Each year, EFSA must, in collaboration with the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), produce the annual European Union Summary Reports on zoonoses, antimicrobial resistance and foodborne outbreaks. In preparing these, EFSA works closely with Member States.

Zoonoses are infections and diseases that are transmissible from animals to humans. They can be acquired from animals or through eating contaminated food. Take *Campylobacter* and *Salmonella*; they remain the most common causes of zoonotic diseases in humans in the EU.

It is important that national food safety authorities and EFSA co-operate to identify which foods and animals are the main sources of infections. Such information, pooled from all across Europe, helps protect human health, for example, through contributing to improved EU control measures in the food chain.

Each Member State sends its national data to EFSA and the European Commission. EFSA works closely with national authorities to ensure that across Europe, Member States collect and provide comparable data. The Authority then compiles and analyses the information provided before sending the draft report to the national authorities for comment. EFSA takes these comments into account before ultimately publishing the annual report. The 2007 report will be divided into three sections: zoonoses, food-borne outbreaks and antimicrobial resistance. Each section will be published separately.

In preparing the report, EFSA also works with the ECDC who is responsible for the data and analysis on zoonotic infections in humans. When the report was published, EFSA held a joint press conference with the ECDC in January 2009.

EFSA also co-operates with the Commission and Member States in analysing EU-wide baseline surveys on zoonoses in different foodstuffs and animal species. Here, the Commission co-ordinates the survey and collects the data. EFSA receives the data and analyses them. A Task Force on Zoonoses Data Collection, an EFSA network comprising Member States representatives, works together to review and publish the survey results. Together with the findings of the summary report, such co-operation ensures Europe's risk managers can make informed decisions to protect consumers.



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EFSA's networking with Member States forges closer ties, finds review

A review of EFSA's 2006 Strategy for Co-operation and Networking has found that ties with Member States are well developed. Among Member States the consensus was that rather than start new activities, existing initiatives should be continued and some further strengthened. These concern: Focal Points; harmonisation of and training on risk assessment methods; data collection; facilitating applications for Article 36 calls; strengthening existing networks with Member States; and identifying where additional networks may add value.

The strategy calls for strengthening Member States' co-operation through the Advisory Forum. For this, there are, since 2008, Focal Points in all Member States supporting Advisory Forum members in their daily networking and scientific co-operation work. In addition, the Steering Group on Co-operation, in which both the Scientific Committee and the Advisory Forum participate, provides oversight on

joint European Scientific Co-operation (ESCO) Working Group projects.

Grants awarded to competent organisations under Article 36 of EFSA's Founding Regulation and contracts awarded to carry out scientific work have also grown: in 2009 EFSA will spend €7.5 million on these activities.

In June, EFSA's Management Board backed the proposal to boost risk assessment capacity and expertise in Europe in the medium term. EFSA is pursuing this further and will be discussing further initiatives with its Scientific Committee and Advisory Forum.

All told, it is clear that EFSA's Member State co-operation and networking has already come a long way.

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Update on EFSA's Scientific Co-operation projects

A key priority for EFSA is mobilising scientific resources throughout Europe. To help drive joint EFSA Member State collaboration, the Authority has established working groups for scientific co-operation (ESCOs) in a number of areas. Participants in ESCO projects include national experts nominated by Member States through the Advisory Forum, members of the Scientific Panels or Scientific Committee, and EFSA's scientific staff.

One of the working groups, covering emerging risks, has built on EFSA's achievements to date to identify and communicate emerging risks. The working group recommended that EFSA complete and validate its overall approach to emerging risks, particularly in relation to data sources and indicators. This included ensuring that EFSA can learn from non-food safety sectors. The Authority should also develop an approach to communicate emerging risks responsibly and establish a fully-functioning network to share data and results with other specialist bodies. In addition, overall awareness of this area should be increased including further research into ways to identify emerging risks.

Another working group looked at fostering harmonised risk assessment approaches in Member States. It recommended in its

final report that EFSA and Member States develop so-called 'country profiles' for a better understanding of how risk assessment is organised in different countries. In addition, risk assessment outputs of national organisations should be made publicly available. With this in mind, EFSA developed an Information Exchange Platform to share scientific information between EFSA and Member States. Efforts are also needed to implement quality management tools in the risk assessment process. Within specific scientific areas, they recommended as well that risk assessment approaches need to be further harmonised.

Meanwhile, an ESCO working group was created to characterise the potential hazards or benefits of isoflavones from soy or red clover in food and food supplements, following a German request for advice. Isoflavones are natural plant substances. Products containing isoflavones – e.g. soya-based products – are growing in popularity in Europe. However, although they are considered to be part of a healthy diet, there are questions surrounding their health impact. The work of this group should help EFSA decide whether a full risk assessment is required. ■

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Article 36 facts and figures

Under Article 36 of EFSA's Founding Regulation, Member State-nominated organisations, selected by EFSA's Management Board, can assist the Authority in its work, such as data collection.

- > Now 371 approved organisations can help EFSA prepare opinions or collect data, for example.
- > Article 36 organisations have grown by over 50% (up from 243 organisations).
- > During 2008, EFSA launched 20 Article 36 calls for proposals for scientific support worth €2.2 million.
- > During 2008, EFSA signed 18 grants for scientific support worth €2.0 million.
- > In 2009, EFSA has planned to spend €3.9 million on grants, compared to €1.7 million (2007) and €2.0 million (2008).



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

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