

Feature

Importance of EFSA-Member State cooperation underlined by EU Commissioner Dalli



The EU Commissioner for Health and Consumer Policy, John Dalli, in his address to EFSA's Advisory Forum in Malta in September, spoke of the vital importance of EFSA's cooperation with Member States to the EU food safety system.

Commissioner Dalli affirmed that EFSA's strategy on cooperation from 2006 has given rise to effective scientific risk assessment cooperation between Member States. Over the years, EFSA has continued to strengthen its ties with its counterparts and partners, across Europe. This is reflected in the tripling, since 2007, of the share of EFSA's budget dedicated to cooperation reaching almost €8 million this year.

He outlined how effective collaboration has many advantages. For example, EFSA and Member States can draw on a pool of national experts to help deliver sound scientific advice, pool resources, avoid duplication and capitalise on synergies to work towards common goals. As partners in the EU's risk assessment system, EFSA and Member States share the latest information to reach common understanding which are then communicated to Europe's citizens to reinforce trust in the overall EU food safety system. Being partners, also means they work together which ensures coherence of messages and the sense of collective ownership in EFSA's work and helps build mutual trust.

While acknowledging what has been achieved, Commissioner Dalli also spoke of future challenges. In particular, he mentioned: the re-evaluation of numerous food and feed additives that will require EFSA to involve Member States in their planning to help it shoulder the growing workload; the arrival of new technologies, calling for the latest information to be shared; the need for new risk assessment methodologies to be developed and for coherent messages to be delivered; and the continued efforts to build on the data collection from Member States that underpins so much of the risk assessment work across the EU.

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Contents

Feature

- 1 Importance of EFSA-Member State cooperation underlined by EU Health Commissioner Dalli

Interview

- 2 Towards a better understanding of consumer risk perception: Interview with Professor George Gaskell from the London School of Economics

Highlights

- 3 New research results on EU consumers' perceptions of food-related risks
- 4 EFSA networks: Capitalising on Member State expertise

Events

- 4 The health risks of recycled materials discussed at the 9th BfR Forum on Consumer Protection



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National food safety authority representatives had gathered in Malta for one of EFSA's regular Advisory Forum meetings. These meetings are an opportunity for EFSA, national representatives and observers from the European Commission and Switzerland, to get together and address issues of common interest in risk assessment and risk communication.

During the meeting in Malta, members of the Advisory Forum illustrated with real examples how EFSA and Member States are actively cooperating across all of the many areas of EFSA's work. These included data collection and food classification, pesticides, emerging risks, handling food safety crises and risk communications. ■

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Interview

Towards a better understanding of consumer risk perception

> Professor George Gaskell,
London School of Economics

? **What exactly is consumer risk perception?**

> George Gaskell The study of risk perception took off with public worries about civil nuclear power. Research identified significant differences between the experts' and the public's assessment of the risks. As the research developed it became evident that characteristics of a risk affect public perceptions; people are more concerned about those risks that are unfamiliar, involuntary and that are easily brought to mind. Studying consumer food risk is relatively recent and can be traced back to the introduction of GM food and a variety of health scares, notably BSE and dioxins.

? **Why measure consumer risk perception?**

There are two aspects of consumer risk perception that are of interest. First, there are national differences. So for example, in some countries food is seen as a source of stress while in other countries it is seen as a pleasure. Over the years, my research has shown that Americans are far more concerned about the link between diet and health, than are the French or Belgians. British people are concerned about additives, Greeks about the integrity of the food chain and the Dutch about obesity and heart disease. Second, is the way people think about and assess in their own mind the type of risks that EFSA's scientific panels work on, for example, pesticide residues and other contaminants, hygiene in and outside the home, etc.



? **What is the benefit of risk perception research to public authorities in Europe?**

With the Eurobarometer survey we achieve a systematic mapping of food risk perceptions across Europe. This provides vital information about national and cross national food concerns to inform risk communication and public information strategies; to flag up new developments that may be sensitive, for example nanoparticles, animal cloning and endocrine disruptors; and, since the 2010 survey followed a similar survey in 2005, to monitor changes over time.

Finally, of particular interest is the relationship between trust and risk perception. Trust in the authorities and institutions responsible for public safety attenuates consumer concerns about risks. In this context findings from the Eurobarometer acts as a performance review, giving feedback to those involved in the food chain, from farm to fork. ■



New research results on EU consumers' perceptions of food-related risks

The majority of Europeans associate food and eating with enjoyment. According to a new Eurobarometer survey, those who are concerned about possible food-related risks tend to worry more about chemical contamination of food rather than bacterial contamination or health and nutrition issues. The poll also showed most Europeans have confidence in national and European food safety agencies as information sources on possible risks associated with food.

"Understanding consumers' perception of risk is critical to providing timely, clear and effective communications regarding food safety. The Eurobarometer findings highlight the importance of EFSA's work and reaffirm the Authority as a trusted source of information. Moving forward, EFSA will use these learnings to help shape the future of its work in communications," said European Food Safety Authority Executive Director Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle.

When asked about their perceptions of food, the majority of respondents associated to a large extent food and eating with enjoyment, such as selecting fresh and tasty food (58%), or the pleasure of having meals with family and friends (54%). Less than half of respondents (44%) focused on concerns such as looking for affordable prices and satisfying hunger. Fewer respondents were concerned about the safety of food (37%) or nutritional issues such as checking calories and nutrients (23%).

When placed in the context of other risks that could personally affect them, more EU citizens ranked the economic crisis (20%) and environmental pollution (18%) as very likely to affect their lives compared with the possible risk of food damaging their health (11%).

Public concerns about food-related risks

No single widespread concern about food-related risks was mentioned spontaneously by a majority of respondents – 19% cited chemicals, pesticides and other substances as the major concerns, while 1 in 10 answered that there was no problem at all with food. When then prompted by a list of possible issues associated with food, respondents mentioned as risks to be "very worried" about: chemical residues from pesticides in fruit, vegetables and cereals 31% (up 3 percentage points compared to 2005); antibiotics or hormones in meat 30% (up 3 points on 2005); cloning animals for food products 30% and pollutants such as mercury in fish and dioxins in pork 29% (up 3 points on 2005). Fewer people were "very worried" about bacterial contamination of foods (23%) and even fewer about possible nutritional risks like putting on weight (15%) or not having a healthy/balanced diet (15%).

Public confidence in information sources on food-related risks

The survey found that EU citizens expressed the highest level of confidence in information obtained from doctors and other health professionals (84%), followed by family and



EUROBAROMETER

friends (82%), consumer organisations (76%), scientists (73%) and environmental protection groups (71%). National and European food safety agencies (EFSA) and EU institutions drew a relatively high level of confidence at 64% and 57% respectively, with national governments at 47%.

Asked how they respond to information on food-related matters communicated in the media or on the Internet, around half said they ignored stories in the media or worried about them but did not change their eating habits. There appears to be a greater tendency to ignore information regarding diet and health issues (29%) than food safety-related risks (24%).

EU food safety system – consumers feel protected

There is broad agreement that public authorities do a lot to ensure that food is safe in Europe, that public authorities are quick to act, base their decisions on scientific evidence and do a good job in informing people about food-related risks. The level of agreement is higher than in 2005. Opinion is more divided on whether scientific advice and public authorities are independent from other interests. While 46% of respondents agree that public authorities in the EU view the health of citizens as more important than the profits of producers (up 7 percentage points on 2005), 42% disagree with this statement and 12% said they do not know. More than 81% of respondents believe public authorities should do more to ensure that food is healthy and to inform people about healthy diets and lifestyles.

"This survey really gives us a fascinating insight into what Europeans are currently thinking about food and possible risks associated with food and we are happy to be able to share the findings with our colleagues in EU Member States," said EFSA Director of Communications Anne-Laure Gassin. *"It is also positive to see food is associated with pleasure, that national and European food safety agencies are thought to be doing a good job and, in particular, that scientists are very much viewed as trusted sources of information."*

The Eurobarometer findings will provide an important resource for carrying out further research on the relation between trust in information sources, confidence in public authorities and perception of food-related risks. ■

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EFSA networks: Capitalising on Member State expertise

As Europe's food safety authority, EFSA cooperates closely with national food safety agencies to assess food-related risks. EFSA's thematic networks are a vital part of EFSA's Strategy on Cooperation and Networking with EU Member States to capitalise on the breadth and depth of scientific knowledge across Europe.



EFSA chairs each network. Each network consists of nationally appointed EU Member State organisations with expertise in a given area. These organisations then appoint the members who actually take part in the network meetings. European Commission representatives may participate in the work of the networks. Other organisations, including those from outside the EU with specific expertise, may also be invited to participate in the networks as observers.

The networks facilitate scientific cooperation through the exchange of information, expertise and best practice in a specific area. They also help support Member State cooperation by coordinating activities, that

may lead to the development and implementation of joint projects.

Currently there are networks on: animal health and welfare; BSE/TSE; emerging risks; GMOs; microbiological risk assessment; plant health; harmonisation of risk assessment methodologies; two networks on pesticides; as well as three different data collection networks looking at chemical occurrence, food consumption and zoonoses. The latest network will cover nanotechnology. ■

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Events

The health risks of recycled materials discussed at the 9th BfR Forum on Consumer Protection

Germany's Federal Institute for Risk Assessment (BfR) held its 9th Forum on Consumer Protection on 28-29 October 2010 in Berlin. Around 300 participants representing public institutions, policy makers, researchers, industry and consumers discussed how to package food safely and, in particular, the health risks of recycled materials.

The forum provided an overview of the issue including the benefits in terms of

sustainable management as well as the possible health risks of recycled materials. EFSA's guidance on assessing the safety of recycling processes was also mentioned.

The participants generally agreed that finding solutions to reduce the migration of mineral oil from cardboard packages made of recycled paper into foods is urgently needed. ■

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