

Feature

Close cooperation key to rapid response to food safety threats



Europe enjoys one of the highest standards of food safety in the world. However, food safety threats can strike anytime, despite the rigorous controls that exist. Luckily, Europe is well placed to respond swiftly and provide rapid advice to risk managers. They can then act to lessen the effects and reassure consumers.

EFSA was created in response to the food safety crises of the 1990s to provide independent scientific advice on food safety matters. Over the years it has established fast track procedures to work closely with Member States and quickly answer urgent requests for advice. In practice, the Authority uses two different ways to respond, depending on the degree of urgency:

- A statement prepared by EFSA staff within days. Panel chairs are kept informed throughout the process. Panel experts and/or external experts may also be consulted.
- When there is slightly more time, a fast-track statement/opinion developed and adopted by Scientific Panels or the Scientific Committee.

A recent example included scientific advice on the possible food and feed safety risks from ash, following the eruption of an Icelandic volcano. EFSA contacted scientific organisations

in Member States, as well as European agencies, Iceland, and international organisations, to seek the latest information when drafting the advice.

In 2009, EFSA responded to an urgent request from the Commission to assess the public health risks due to nicotine being found in wild mushrooms. Member States promptly provided food consumption data and national risk assessments that EFSA used in formulating its own risk assessment advice. In the case of dioxins discovered in Irish pork in 2008, a quick response from Member States provided data that helped EFSA issue a statement in two days. That same day the European Commission was then able to propose guidelines for Member States to act on to manage the incident and protect consumers.

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In times of crises especially, communicating consistent messages across the EU about food safety issues is important to inform consumers about possible risks. During such times, it is vital that EFSA works closely with national counterparts in order to collect all available information and data. EFSA keeps members of its Advisory Forum informed of its scientific advice and any related communications.

In urgent cases, cooperation between EFSA, the concerned Member States, the Commission and EFSA's Advisory Forum of representatives from national food safety agencies in all Member States, is key. This helps ensure timely, coordinated risk assessments, sound risk management decisions and coherent risk communications.

EFSA continues to fine-tune its readiness to respond to

urgent threats. For example, the Authority is building food consumption and food composition databases to provide more accurate and comparable exposure data, and is extending its network of experts so that contact details of experts in national authorities are at hand when needed. In addition in 2009, EFSA ran crisis simulations to test its ability to handle crisis situations, and to communicate and collaborate with the Commission and Member States. These simulations were a valuable learning experience for staff, and also helped all those involved become more prepared to act quickly and effectively when such situations arise. ■

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Interview

Closer collaboration for even better food safety and greater efficiency

> **Dr Andrew Wadge**, *Chief Scientist and Interim Director of Food Policy at the UK's Food Standards Agency, and EFSA Advisory Forum member.*

? **How does EFSA and Member States benefit from mutual cooperation?**



> **Andrew Wadge** For me, the key point is that there is more than enough work for everyone to do. There are a range of food safety challenges that affect all of us across Europe. We need to pool resources to join together. The main benefit is that EFSA acts as a gold standard for food safety risk assessment in Europe and we can all work together to operate to that high standard.

? **What are the benefits from such cooperation to EU citizens?**

For citizens across Europe, food safety is important wherever you are, especially since we increasingly travel. Therefore, cooperation is important for two reasons: 1) to ensure there is a high level of food safety protection for all EU citizens; 2) to ensure there is efficiency in how we use our resources. There is no point duplicating what we can do by cooperation and working together. We need access to a high standard of risk assessment and protection that is done in a way that is very efficient and cost effective in the use of our resources.

? **How can EFSA and Member States further enhance this collaboration?**

Maybe there is an opportunity to identify where there are centres of excellence and perhaps build on those. Not every Member State has the same level of expertise. One Member State may be excellent in exposure assessment, for example. It would make sense to make use of this rather than doing it ourselves. We need to recognise where the centres of excellence are and utilise them in the best possible way rather than consider that they need to be done by EFSA or one Member State in particular. ■



EFSA publishes review of data collection activities

EFSA has published a report outlining its current activities and future priorities in the area of data collection. The report underlines that accurate, comprehensive and comparable data on the occurrence of different substances or microorganisms in food, as well as on food consumption habits, are essential for EFSA to be able to deliver high-quality risk assessments and advice on nutritional and health concerns. This in turn helps to provide the best possible protection to European consumers.

EFSA bases its scientific advice on the most comprehensive and up-to-date data which are available and, working closely with EU Member States and other partners, the Authority has made considerable progress in recent years. The report highlights in particular EFSA's annual Community Zoonoses Report and the Annual Report on Pesticide Residues in Food, as well as ad-hoc reports on the occurrence of *Salmonella*, *Campylobacter* and chemical contaminants including acrylamide and dioxins.

EFSA is currently in the process of extending its European food consumption database. However, EU Member States



use different methods to collect food consumption data, which makes it difficult to carry out EU-wide analyses or country-to-country comparisons. In close cooperation with the EU Member States, EFSA is therefore supporting harmonised food consumption data collection. This should allow more efficient and accurate exposure assessments to be carried out.

In line with Article 33 of EFSA's founding regulation, this report on EFSA's activities in the area of data collection has been sent to the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council of Ministers.

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EFSA consults European and international partners on bisphenol A

EFSA has consulted with experts from across Europe, as well as several international risk assessment authorities, on bisphenol A. BPA is widely used in the manufacture of polycarbonate plastics, including materials which come into contact with food, and has been linked to a number of possible health problems.

The first meeting took place at EFSA on 26 March. It was attended by 25 experts nominated by 19 European countries, as well as members of EFSA's scientific Panel on food contact materials (CEF) and European Commission representatives.

At the meeting, EFSA outlined its draft BPA opinion, as well as the initial findings of its review of recent related scientific literature. Panel members stressed that all relevant scientific information will be critically analysed to determine its importance to the safety assessment of BPA.

Experts from Denmark, France and Germany presented their recent or ongoing assessments, which gave participants the

opportunity to contribute any other relevant information. The main issues discussed included the design of scientific studies on BPA, toxicological aspects and the strengths and weaknesses of certain individual studies.

Similar issues – as well as details of new risk assessments and studies being carried out – were also discussed with the US Food and Drug Administration, Health Canada, Food Standards Australia New Zealand, the Food Safety Commission of Japan and the World Health Organisation during a telephone conference on 29 March.

EFSA's independent scientific advice on BPA is due to be adopted in July by the CEF Panel. EFSA is promoting dialogue with its national and international partners on this issue to ensure that European-level advice is based upon the most up-to-date and reliable information possible.

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Forum on substances affecting the endocrine system

Germany's Federal Institute for Risk Assessment (BfR) hosted the 8th BfR-Forum on Consumer Protection in April. The forum, entitled "When substances affect the endocrine system", allowed Member States to present their work on

endocrine active substances. The event was run in cooperation with the French food safety authority (Afssa). During the event, EFSA presented its work in this area, focusing on pesticides.

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EFSA Journal: Science at your fingertips

EFSA has launched the EFSA Journal, a dedicated web area that serves as an electronic, open access scientific journal. The EFSA Journal brings together the Authority's scientific work in one convenient area, making it even more accessible than before to the scientific community.

The EFSA Journal contains the vast body of work being carried out by EFSA and its Scientific Committee and Panels spanning the entire food chain, from food and feed safety, nutrition, animal health and welfare, to plant health and plant protection. The new online presentation of the EFSA Journal will facilitate referencing of the Authority's scientific work in scientific literature and may enable bibliographical databases to index EFSA's scientific outputs thereby raising awareness of EFSA's work amongst the academic community worldwide.

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fee the table of content of the previous month by email or through the dedicated RSS feed. Online users can always quickly consult the latest articles, browse through previous issues dating back to 2003 or use the advanced search feature to find specific topics of interest. The EFSA Journal also offers a new function to facilitate citation of EFSA scientific outputs and the "send" option

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How food safety works across Europe

Germany's Federal Institute for Risk Assessment (BfR), which is also the German Focal Point, has published the 'EU Food Safety Almanac'. This brochure presents the national food and feed safety authorities from 30 countries in Europe.

The brochure contains country profiles describing the main food safety public authorities and expert committees in the 27 Member States and the associated countries Iceland, Norway and Switzerland. Their function and responsibilities in the various countries legal system are also indicated.

The EFSA Focal Points from across Europe helped BfR prepare this publication. The Almanac can be downloaded free of charge from the BfR website in German and English.



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