



European Food Safety Authority

Minutes

INAUGURAL MEETING OF THE ADVISORY FORUM

6 AND 7 MARCH 2003

1. Welcome by Geoffrey Podger, Executive Director, European Food Safety Authority

The Chair, Geoffrey Podger, opened the meeting by welcoming the Member States, the Accession Countries, EFTA countries and the European Commission.

The Chair noted that both EFSA and the Advisory Forum had to meet very high expectations. There would be a strong political, consumerist and food industry interest in the work to be undertaken. Equally the Advisory Forum needed to be created and used in such a way that it was helpful and mutually supportive to EFSA and the Members States. The Chair looked forward to building partnerships with the Forum's members to help find joint solutions to many of the food safety and risk communication problems which were jointly faced.

2. Tour de table - Introduction by Members of the Advisory Forum

The members introduced themselves and briefly described their national situation regarding national agencies and administrations dealing with food safety.

The members were asked to provide the secretariat with changes to the document 'National Agencies Info Note'.

The list of participants is attached.

3. Building the relationship between EFSA and the national agencies

The Chair introduced some issues following from the establishment of the Authority in order to provoke discussion:

- 3.1. The Authority should provide added value rather than substitute for functions already well provided by Member States. This principle would seem to apply across the whole range of the Authority's functions from risk assessment to risk communication whilst recognising that the Authority may also play an important role in co-ordination. How to achieve this in practice requires extensive discussion with Members States.
- 3.2. Within the framework laid down in the Regulation¹, the Authority is seeking to provide a greater level of input from the Member States to the selection process of the members of the Authority's scientific committees which will ultimately be proposed to its Management Board. Member States will be offered the

¹ OJ L 31, 1. 2. 2002, p 1

opportunity to comment on short-listed candidates before any list is put up for approval by the Board. It is obviously desirable that the views of the Scientific Committee and the Panels should command general support across the EU.

- 3.3. The Founding Regulation (Article 29(4)) specifically gives the Authority the responsibility, with Member States, for seeking to resolve conflicting scientific opinions. This in itself indicates the need, at an early stage in the Authority's life, to establish mechanisms for sharing new scientific advice around the EU and to identify at an early stage those issues likely to need a joint effort to see whether a greater degree of scientific consensus can be achieved in areas which are contentious.
- 3.4. It is hoped that Member States will be prepared to second staff as detached national experts to the Authority to help with the essential task of offering a higher degree of support to the Scientific Committee and Panels. Such secondments will provide immensely helpful informed links between the Authority and its Member State counterparts and should help avoid situations in which information is not fully shared between parties. For the longer term there is an argument that a proportion of the Authority's scientific posts might best be filled by national secondees for career development and effective co-ordination purposes.
- 3.5. A key task of the Authority is the identification at an early stage of emerging risks. It seems clear that there is no single source for such intelligence. The EU Scientific Committee and Panels will certainly have a role to play but often individual developments may first come to the attention of individual Member States and there may be a need to develop a mechanism for reporting these more widely. Here, as observers, the food research institutes of the Member States can be a crucial source of relevant information and there is an issue as to whether the Authority should commission work in this area on a partnership basis between various national interests.
- 3.6. The Authority itself will not be a major source of research funding. It will however offer advice on food-related research issues to inform the Commission's work programme and it is obviously desirable that such proposals should embrace both the Authority's "central" perception but also those of the Member States as represented in the Advisory Forum. The development of a mechanism for this would seem an early challenge to the Forum.
- 3.7. The Authority's responsibilities embrace not merely risk assessment but risk communication. European consumers will generally look for coherent messages on individual food safety issues across the Union but also very reasonably expect these to be delivered in a way which is culturally sensitive to their particular national background. An important task for the Advisory Forum would seem to be how to establish co-ordination mechanisms which promote coherent messages (where there is a genuine and tested point of scientific difference which needs to be communicated) and provide a proper distribution of effort between the Authority and the Member States.
- 3.8. Consumer organisations currently have high hopes of the Authority and of the Advisory Forum. It is clear that the EU's scientific endeavours in the food area need to have their confidence and it is not reasonable to think that this can be achieved without further innovation to increase consumer involvement. Equally, there are strongly held but divided views amongst EU consumers themselves

as to what new processes they would value. This is an area where the experience of the Member States is clearly of great value and where further testing of European consumer opinion would seem necessary.

- 3.9. The Authority has been established to bring increased openness and transparency to food supply issues at the European level, not least in the recognition that this is one of the pre-conditions for gaining consumer trust. Member States have very useful experience of parallel national initiatives which could contribute to the formulation of Authority's precise future policies. Equally there would seem a need, as more and more information is shared, to adopt generally compatible procedures across the EU as significant differences, irrespective of their basis, are likely in practice to be difficult to maintain. Other stakeholders, in particular the food industry, will have a legitimate concern to ensure that they are also treated fairly in terms of access to information without this involving, in the Authority's view, the granting of preferential access.
- 3.10. The Authority will obviously wish to use all available media to put across its policy positions. It would however seem preferable to do this in parallel with related activity being undertaken by Member States where this applies. This would imply the need for extensive cross-referencing if the full range of EU-wide knowledge and activity in this area is to be communicated to the European consumer. There would seem, for example, an obvious need to link the Authority's website to that of the individual national authorities (and vice-versa) in order that those who consult either as their first port of call should have the potential benefit of both.
- 3.11. While much of the Authority's activity will inevitably concentrate on specific legislative requirement, the Authority will inevitably – and, in the Chairman's view, rightly – be expected to be active in risk assessment of topical food safety issues of the day. This may entail original work by the Authority and/or the bringing together of expertise already being brought to bear across the EU by national authorities. The Forum may well prove the ideal mechanism for identifying such issues and considering how they can most profitably be taken forward.
- 3.12. The members agreed that they all should help each other and the Authority. Amongst them, there is a realistic understanding of what the issues are and together, they can see what the practical solutions could be. In this context, the Chair invited the members to second high level scientist from national organisation to the Authority to build relationships between the member states and the Authority.

4. Practical aspects to progress and enhance scientific co-operation - EFSA and the national bodies

Christine Majewski introduced this matter by explaining the main articles in the founding regulation 178/2002 and by highlighting where the member states come in.

Following a question regarding the call for expression of interest for certain scientific and technical support for the Authority (the "ami" list). There were concerns that this process would cut across national responsibilities and lead to poorly commissioned work. EFSA did not believe this should be the case but undertook to distribute an explanatory note on the procedure. The Chair relied on the help of the member states for competent organisations to join and apply on this list.

In addition, it was decided that a working group between the Authority and the Advisory Forum on exchange of information will be created.

The members agreed that a few examples, such as acrylamide, GMOs and dioxins, could be taken up by the Authority and the members to start the work together, build confidence and pool the knowledge. The members are asked to write to the secretariat with suggestions on how this issue could be taken forward.

5. Procedural Rules

- 5.1. The procedural rules of the Advisory Forum had been adopted by the Management Board on a provisional basis with changes scheduled into the work of the Management Board at their meeting 18 June. Although the Management Board decides on these changes, the Advisory Forum members are asked to suggest any changes to the secretariat prior to its meeting of 13-14 May. The secretariat will advise the Advisory Forum members on any alterations taken by the Management Board in its meeting of 18 June.
- 5.2. As stated in the procedural rules and in accordance with article 37 of Regulation 178/2002, the Advisory Forum members, alternates and observers need to make an annual declaration of interest in writing as well as a declaration of confidentiality. Since the country is signing these declarations, anybody coming to an Advisory Forum meeting is bound by them.

6. Information technology links with the Member States

To be held over to a future meeting

7. Future Format of meetings

7.1. Standing/Regular Items on the Agenda

The Authority proposed the following standing items on the agenda of the Advisory Forum:

- i. Update and exchange of views from the Authority on scientific matters currently under review in the Authority including those where there is current consumer concern
- ii. Briefing from the Member States on significant new and existing scientific issues under consideration at national level
- iii. Emerging risks: exchange of information from the Authority and from Member States concerning emerging risks.
- iv. Updates from Working Groups of the Advisory Forum
- v. Early warning concerning significant reports and studies to be published by the Authority or a Member State and risk communication issues of general interest not otherwise covered.

The Chair requested the members to indicate if there are any particular issues they wish to raise in future meetings.

7.2. Priorities for Consideration by the Advisory Forum

The following topics were proposed for substantial examination by the Advisory Forum during 2003:

- Risk communications
- Achieving increased scientific consensus
- Research recommendations to the Community's research programmes
- Building collaboration and co-operation on matters within the remit of the Authority with the Member States' national bodies
- Building networks of experts
- Priorities for working groups of the Advisory Forum to address

The members agreed that there is a general interest to explore risk communications and what is understood by it. The Chair suggested to, if financially possible, set up a working group to do some preparatory work on the issue. The scope of this possible working group is to be taken up in the meeting of 13-14 May.

It was decided that as an absolute priority the Forum should consider how an immediate food issue will be handled, not by a working group but by all the members. Since food crisis management is not only a matter of risk assessment, but also one of risk management, the Authority is already working closely with the European Commission on this issue.

7.3. Venues for Future meetings

The Authority received various suggestions to hold the Advisory Forum meetings outside of Belgium. The Chair thanked the member states for the invitations and hospitality and agreed that the host should not necessarily be the presidency since that member state already has a lot of pressure for other kinds of meetings. Against that background the offer of the Hellenic Food Authority to host the next meeting was particularly appreciated. The Authority is to look into the assistance and funding issues that could be provided to the host country.

7.4. Dates in 2003

It was agreed to start the Advisory Forum meetings in the afternoon, followed by an informal dinner and to continue in the morning of the following day. The suggested days for meetings in 2003 are:

- 13-14 May
- 4 July
- 10 September
- 4 November
- 11 December

8. Update on the Call for Expression of Interests of scientists

- 8.1. Geoffrey Podger introduced this topic by explaining the various stages in the selection process. At the time of the meeting, around 340 applications had been received. Since the call only closed on 14 March, more than this number again were still to be expected. The Authority's evaluation team was reinforced by Commission scientists with experience in the relevant areas. Prof Pascal (INRA) and Dr Tarrago (IRTA) are invited on 2 and 3 April to externally and independently audit a random selection of the evaluations.
- 8.2. The Advisory Forum members are invited to provide feedback against the scientific competence and evaluation criteria of the shortlisted candidates. The secretariat will prepare and distribute a shortlist to the Advisory Forum members with copies to the Management Board members in the week commencing 7 April. The Executive Director will propose a final list to the Board for approval in its meeting of 29 April. In this meeting, the secretariat will report back on the audit, the feedback by the Advisory Forum members and the progress made.
- 8.3. The rules of procedures for the Scientific Committee and the Panels will be introduced at their kick-off meetings in the course of May. In addition, the Authority and the selected chairs will discuss the guidelines and rules on how to set up working groups. The outcome on this will be taken up in one of the following Advisory Forum meetings. The Working Group experts are not confined to the final list of candidates; it is very well possible to bring in completely new people into the working groups, but not into the Committee and the Panels.

9. Any other business

No other business was added to the agenda.

The Chair closed the meeting by thanking the members for their positive and constructive approach.