

## **EFSA's Role in Food Safety**

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**Lebensmittelsicherheit –  
Anspruch, Wirklichkeit, Wahrnehmung**

**26. April 2007**

**Hotel Palace, Berlin**

## **BLL-Jahrestagung am 26.4.2007, Berlin**

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**Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle, Geschäftsführende Direktorin**

Thank you Chairman,

It is with great pleasure that I am here today to address the BLL Annual Conference. As the Executive Director of the European Food Safety Authority I am privileged to head up an organisation that has as its central role, the assessment of risks in food and feed, animal health and welfare and a growing role in the very important issues of diet, nutrition and health and plant protection. EFSA was established on the back of the food crises that occurred in the 1990s (BSE, Dioxin) and has the dual role of both risk assessor and risk communicator, established to provide the European Commission, the Member States and the European parliament with independent, high quality scientific advice, while at the same time also having the responsibility to communicate about its findings.

This year EFSA will celebrate her fifth anniversary. I think it is important to remember that the remit of EFSA was specifically developed to help improve EU food safety and rebuild consumer and trading partners' confidence in the EU food supply and in the system that underpins the legislation made at the EU level. It is all too easy to forget the real crisis of confidence that can occur when there are national or EU wide food scares. At the time of the creation of EFSA, consumers had been bombarded with information - and sometimes misinformation - about a range of scares: BSE and the link to new variant CJD, Salmonella, Listeria, Dioxin and many many others. I think it is fair to say that the public did not always have an authoritative source of advice and information which led to confusion and doubt about the matter at hand and even scepticism about those responsible for protecting the food supply and consumer safety.

It is therefore not by accident that the legislator has given EFSA the important guiding principles of scientific excellence, independence, transparency and openness. With these guiding principles EFSA can deliver authoritative Europe wide assessment of risk, providing the risk manager with the basis for appropriate measures to address the risk, while at the same time communicating accurate information.

To be authoritative, EFSA has to be known and trusted and its scientific assessment work robust and open to scrutiny. But EFSA is also a young organisation and we have to continue to build our profile and gain the trust of consumers, and other stakeholders ensuring that we have the highest standards. It is not enough for any organisation to state that it has the best standards unless it is willing for its processes and products to be reviewed and assessed. I am confident that EFSA has high standards of science, independence and integrity but we are not complacent and I have instigated work within the scientific committee and staff to look at how we review internally and externally our scientific processes and output with the objective of continuous improvement.

To be able to deliver the best risk assessments for Europe EFSA has to be *plugged in* to scientific information and data available at the national and international level. EFSA recently signed a declaration of intent with the national authorities from all 27 member states and other neighbouring non-EU countries to facilitate the exchange of scientific information and data and ensure that EFSA has access to as wide a range of information as possible to draw its scientific conclusions. By sharing information and being well informed about each others activities we can move towards a more common understanding of the risks that exist at national and EU level, be able to assist risk managers develop more coherent risk management strategies, avoid duplication of effort in risk assessment and improve the coherence of risk communications across the Community. Cooperation with the national agencies is therefore a top priority for EFSA.

On independence there are two important considerations: firstly EFSA has been created to provide independent scientific advice and this is fundamental to the overall EU food safety system. Unless the scientific basis for EU food law is trusted and from a reliable source, the risk managers would not be able to build confidence in their decisions that they base on this advice. EFSA as you know is not part of the EU risk management institutions; it is managed by an independent Board which gives us this cherished independence.

Secondly, it is important that our working methods, our experts and staff work independently of undue influences. We have in place systems for staff and members of the scientific committees and panels and of the Board to provide written declarations of any interest they may hold. We are working to enhance the way we manage and follow these with the objective of being able to better demonstrate the independence of our scientific process.

But while the independence of our work has to be guarded and managed so that we are free to draw our conclusions on a scientific risk assessment, EFSA plays an integral part in the EU food law system within which we are accountable for our advice. We are the first step of the process, our opinions are there for the legislators to use. We respond to their needs and much of our work is programmed to assist their policy programme but crucially our opinions are not influenced by political considerations. Only with such obviously independent advice can decision makers reliably develop proportionate and appropriate risk management measures.

When a food safety problem arises those responsible for taking action to manage the risk often find themselves in a situation of conflicting information while at the same time pressure builds for the risk manager to take action. This is also a time when consumers can become alarmed as the 'powers that be' are not acting – EFSA is acutely aware of the possible damage these periods of uncertainty can cause. In the European system EFSA has to be able to play its part in providing risk managers with timely advice – science often takes time to reach a final definitive conclusion but EFSA recognises that risk managers cannot always wait for the final word.

EFSA is therefore looking with its scientific committee at how we can be more reactive in times of urgency and ensure that risk managers are able to take actions based on the best available science.

Transparency and openness are related principles which assist with EFSA's mission of rebuilding confidence in the EU food safety system. EFSA since its early days has opened its doors to stakeholders, the media, the public: our Management Board meetings are held in public, we webstream these and other important events, we have put in place structures in EFSA to hold open dialogue with stakeholders of all backgrounds including those who are our strongest critics. We believe that this open dialogue can only lead to confidence and assist EFSA in understanding the concerns of stakeholders and consumers.

Communications is a fundamental task of EFSA. Communicating on complex scientific matters is quite a challenge and we are fully aware that there are different perceptions of risk around the EU, and as a European level organisation we are not always the best placed to catch the interest of national media. In this respect EFSA works with those organizations who are in close contact with consumers and thereby can deliver a more meaningful message. We not only communicate our messages directly but also through the national food authorities who know how to craft messages to address national concerns.

We are looking more and more to provide simpler communications and to increase our existing practice of notifying national bodies, stakeholders and international partners with information on our key opinions and reports in advance so that they may be prepared to address their own constituencies with accurate information from EFSA. EFSA has also created a working group of its Advisory Forum to which the heads of communications of the national food agencies and the European Commission participate. Through this group and other initiatives EFSA is seeking to develop greater consistency and coherence in the food safety information and messages we communicate so that consumers are not faced with conflicting information.

When considering our priorities and work load for 2007, it is important to note that EFSA is still a growing organisation at a crucial stage of its development. EFSA's role evolves with almost every legislative act in the food and feed law area. At the same time, the risks in EFSA's area change and it is crucial that EFSA is ready at any time to respond to any emergency or alert. For example, EFSA is working in close collaboration with the National Authorities and the Commission on Blue Tongue an animal disease which has unusually appeared in the North of Europe. We are also continuing our important work on Avian Influenza where we are responsible for providing the scientific basis to underpin community measures in the animal health area. We are also embarking on the assessment of risks in the plant health area where there are many possible threats to plants in Europe, which could have a significant impact on public health and on the environment; like for example, the development of Ambrosia or the work we are doing assessing the issues around ensuring Citrus canker is not introduced into Europe.

During 2007, EFSA will consolidate its activities to support the EU's evolving policy on nutrition and diet related diseases. EFSA will in particular develop further its work in the area of health claims and nutrition. The Dietetic Products, Nutrition and Allergies Panel has already started its important work on nutritional profiling and on the guidance for the preparation of applications on disease-risk reduction claims, claims referring to children's development and on other claims.

Looking ahead - we see new challenges on the horizon: nanoparticles in food for example. In this respect we will launch in 2007, collaborative activities with the Member States to look at this with particular focus on the challenges that this new technology presents to those engaged in conducting risk assessments.

We are also actively looking at the issue of cloned animals and their products and the possible challenges these may present.

In both these, and indeed in other cases, EFSA is looking at the work being done internationally and at national level in the Member States so that we are able to give a globally based perspective.

At the same time that we face these new challenges – EFSA also has to stay vigilant and continue to work on the threats posed by our "old friends": Salmonella, Campylobacter and Listeria, aflatoxins, acrylamide, and other contaminants, BSE and TSEs, to name but a few.

With these new and "old" challenges, it is important that EFSA is able to be dynamic and flexible in its work, while maintaining efficiency. EFSA has not only to be efficient and cost effective but also it must deliver added value to the EU and its citizens. I will continue to put in place, and enhance across the whole of EFSA in 2007, objective based management systems focused on delivering the best possible service to the EU food safety system and in particular risk managers.

EFSA also has to be able to gaze into a crystal ball – and we have to look ahead and try identify emerging risks and provide the legislators and stakeholders with the information and advice needed in a timely fashion to enable as far as possible the risk managers and operators to keep the EU food supply safe and rebuild and maintain consumers' confidence. In this respect EFSA has also initiated work through its Scientific Committee to assist EFSA in identifying emerging risks so that can provide an 'early warning' of developing issues.

Through the activities of its staff and Management Board, its Scientific Committee and Panels, with the close involvement of the national food authorities and dialogue with Stakeholders, it is my intention to make EFSA globally recognised as the European reference body on risk assessment on food and feed safety, animal health and welfare, nutrition and plant health.

Thank you