



European Food Safety Authority

**STRATEGY
FOR COOPERATION AND NETWORKING
BETWEEN THE EU MEMBER STATES AND EFSA**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- I. INTRODUCTION**
- II. STRATEGY OBJECTIVES: WORKING TOWARDS A COMMON APPROACH FOR EUROPEAN RISK ASSESSMENTS**
- III. PRIORITY AREAS FOR STRENGTHENING THE COOPERATION AND NETWORKING**
 - III.a Exchanging and collecting scientific data and information*
 - III.b Sharing risk assessment practices*
 - III.c Contributing to the harmonisation of methodologies for risk assessment*
 - III.d Promoting coherence in risk communications*
- IV. STRENGTHENING MEMBER STATES' COOPERATION THROUGH THE ADVISORY FORUM IN COLLABORATION WITH THE SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE**
- V. CONCLUSIONS**

I. INTRODUCTION

1. A key task for EFSA, and EU Member States, is the development and communication of high quality scientific opinions, which are recognized as truly authoritative both within the EU and in the wider international arena. These opinions need to be based on sound science involving Europe's leading experts in regulatory risk assessment. The development of such opinions can be resource intensive. Careful consideration needs to be given to the question of how the expertise available to EFSA and within the Member States can be best utilised. Member States currently have a variety of mechanisms for obtaining scientific advice. For example some, but not all, Member States have their own scientific advisory committees.
2. EFSA and the EU Member States are also committed to providing timely and effective response and advice on risks associated with the food chain, to all interested parties and the public at large. The establishment of an effective communications network will strengthen coherence of risk communications in the EU, and thereby contribute to building consumer confidence in the risk assessment process.
3. In June 2006, EFSA's Management Board recommended the development of greater cooperation and networking between EFSA and its counterparts in the Member States as a key priority over the next five years. They envisage this network of EFSA with the national authorities to be in a position to mobilise pan-European scientific resources towards the establishment of a network of scientific excellence, enabling all partners to maintain/further strengthen their system, both in terms of national activities and their contribution to European activities. Only through close collaboration on scientific activities, through greater dialogue and effective communication and through shared activities the network will be able to enhance the sense of common ownership of its activities and output. Through sharing best practices with the scientific organisations and institutes across Europe, EFSA and the national food authorities will be able to continue to develop their reputation and their standards of scientific excellence.
4. There are already several examples of cooperation between the Member States and EFSA. These include: the assessment of recent data on aspartame; the collection of occurrence data on methyl mercury, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) and furan; consultation on quantitative microbiological risk assessment at Community level¹; collection of risk assessment studies on *Salmonella* in meat and the annual collection of data on zoonoses, antimicrobial resistance and food-borne outbreaks. In addition for BSE risk assessment there is an existing network with Member States facilitating collection of data. The strategy as laid out in this paper seeks to further strengthen the existing arrangements and move towards even closer cooperation on

¹http://www.efsa.europa.eu/etc/medialib/efsa/advisory_forum/adv_meetings/1375.Par.0011.File.dat/af_note_qmra_16thmeet_en_3a1.pdf

MB 19.12.2006 – 6a Strategy for cooperation and networking

scientific and communication activities, through greater dialogue and shared activities to enhance the sense of common ownership of these activities and outputs.

5. Cooperation will only be successful if there are clear mutual benefits. The main benefits anticipated from cooperation include sharing the burden of risk assessments, easy access to expertise not available at home and, in general, making the most efficient use of sparse and finite resources. These benefits will only be fully realised once there is knowledge on and confidence in scientific assessments carried out elsewhere. Therefore, building such confidence is the most important target milestone to achieve the Strategy objectives set out above.
6. In autumn 2006 the Advisory Forum established a Working Group on Cooperation and Networking. The Working Group met on 31 October to develop a strategy for cooperation and networking. The Working Group took into account the report of the AF Working Group on the Exchange of Scientific Information issued in May 2006 and the Declaration of Intent signed by the AF Members subsequently. The Working Group also took note of the two strategic documents discussed at the Advisory Forum meeting in Berne in September 2006: Doc AF 29.09.2006 – 4, Previous and current scientific cooperation with Member States and Doc AF 29.09.2006 – 5, Background on the legal tools for funding scientific cooperation with Member States.
7. At their meeting on 6 and 7 November 2006, the Scientific Committee discussed the issue on the basis of a paper prepared before by an ad hoc Working Group of the Scientific Committee. The Scientific Committee endorsed the need for further strengthening cooperation and networking with the MS and their recommendations are included in this document. The Scientific Committee also suggested a number of specific objectives and main areas of cooperation.
8. The Advisory Forum had an extensive discussion on the draft Strategy paper at its meeting on 30th November in Helsinki. It agreed with the principles as proposed by the Working Group and appreciated the recommendations being forwarded by the Scientific Committee. The Forum finalised the paper by written procedure on 8th December 2006. Early 2007, and following further consultation with the Scientific Committee, the Advisory Forum will develop a list of projects to make the priority areas as listed in Chapter III, operational.
9. The initiatives deriving from this Strategy will be implemented in full respect of the responsibilities and roles attributed to EFSA by its founding Regulation. They are especially without prejudice to specific procedures applicable to requests for opinions referred to the Authority which are laid down in Community legislation governing the scientific evaluation of substances, or products subject to a system of prior authorisation or entry in a positive list.

II. STRATEGY OBJECTIVES: WORKING TOWARDS A COMMON APPROACH FOR EUROPEAN RISK ASSESSMENTS

MB 19.12.2006 – 6a Strategy for cooperation and networking

10. This document contains the framework for cooperation and networking between the EU Member States and EFSA in order to support the development of risk assessments of the highest quality, based on sound science and harmonised methodologies, in all fields within EFSA's remit: food and feed safety; nutrition; animal health and welfare and plant health and plant protection. A well functioning network between the EU Member States and EFSA will increase the effectiveness and efficiency of EU risk assessments. The strategy will also help build awareness and recognition of the value of these risk assessments in Europe and beyond.
11. A *target of ten years* is considered to finalise work to establish a common approach of risk assessments throughout Europe in order to reinforce both the credibility and coherence of scientific opinions and to continually improve the quality of scientific advice of EFSA and the national authorities. This target date, as well as a number of milestones which have to be achieved earlier in order to reach this goal, will be periodically updated.
12. This Strategy will help build greater confidence in the advice available to the European Commission, Member States and food businesses to help them to make appropriate, proportionate and timely risk management decisions. It will also provide the opportunity for more consistency in risk management decision making across Europe based on the best advice being available to all.
13. Moreover, the benefits apply also to those who do risk communication - both risk managers and risk assessors. Greater credibility for risk assessments and increased cooperation are likely to lead to more consistent communication and clearer messages on food safety based on a common approach.

III. PRIORITY AREAS FOR STRENGTHENING THE COOPERATION AND NETWORKING

14. The strategy recognises four priority areas for the establishment of a common approach of risk assessments and communication outputs throughout Europe. These *priority areas* are: a) exchanging and collecting scientific data and information, b) sharing risk assessment practices, c) contributing to the harmonisation of methodologies for risk assessment and d) promoting coherence in risk communication. Improving the involvement of the new and acceding Member States in these activities represents an important element of this strategy.

III.a Exchanging and collecting scientific data and information

15. In order to achieve effective scientific cooperation it is essential to establish efficient systems for the active exchange of information between Member States and EFSA. EFSA will collect, collate and analyse relevant data from the Member States and store these in European databases also accessible for the National Authorities. These systems will facilitate the effective participation of Member States in EFSA's activities and also provide adequate information to EFSA in relation to activities undertaken in Member States.

16. In September 2006 Members of the EFSA Advisory Forum signed a declaration of intent² on enhancing the exchange of scientific information, including the sharing of national work plans, amongst themselves and EFSA. The task of developing an implementation plan for the commitments in the declaration has been assigned to the Advisory Forum Working Group for the Exchange of Scientific Information. The work of this group will be integrated into this strategy for cooperation and networking.

17. As already identified by the Management Board, EFSA will give the highest priority and appropriate resources to developing the practical infrastructure necessary for the greater involvement of the Member States. In particular the EFSA Extranet, which facilitates exchanges of scientific and communications information, will be further developed into a fully functioning and active tool.

² Declaration of intent of members of the EFSA Advisory Forum concerning enhancement of the exchange of scientific information amongst the Advisory Forum Members and EFSA.
http://www.efsa.europa.eu/etc/medialib/efsa/advisory_forum/declaration_of_intent.Par.0001.File.dat/af_declaration_intent_18thmeet_signed.pdf

MB 19.12.2006 – 6a Strategy for cooperation and networking

III.b Sharing risk assessment practices

18. In order to share best risk assessment practices and to stimulate collaboration between groups of Member States, the Advisory Forum will identify in collaboration with the Scientific Committee a list of pilot projects. Preferably, these projects will involve a large, small and new or accession Member State. Consideration should also be given to building on existing examples of successful cooperation. These activities will help raise the profile of EFSA and its network with national authorities within the Member States.
19. EFSA will establish a programme of courses in risk assessment, involving experts from Member States by the end of 2007. Such courses will be supplemented by a programme of study tours, between Member States, involving both senior managers and staff directly involved in risk assessment. In particular, the involvement of the 'new' MS will actively be sought. The aim of both initiatives would be to share experiences between Member States and to contribute to an increased level of mutual trust. The involvement of less experienced experts as observers in the work of the Panels or its Working Groups also provides a mechanism for knowledge transfer.
20. To facilitate the preparation of scientific opinions at very short notice, particularly in response to urgent issues and crisis situations, it is recommended that EFSA establishes in 2007, subject to agreed selection criteria, a database of national experts who could be called upon to participate in the work of the SC and Scientific Panels. The Advisory Forum will be regularly consulted for an update of the list. The database of experts would also be the major source of information for the Scientific Committee and Scientific Panels and for Member States to select external experts as needed.

III.c Contributing to the harmonisation of methodologies for risk assessment

21. Risk assessments require several steps to be followed and aspects to be taken into account. Harmonising risk assessment methodologies in Europe will contribute to an enhanced level of confidence and ultimately the common use of risk assessment methodologies across Europe.
22. It is within EFSA's remit to stimulate, coordinate and define harmonised risk assessment methodologies and approaches and to set priorities for the preparatory activities concerned. In doing so, harmonisation efforts in international organisations such as FAO, OECD, OIE and WHO, will be taken into account. Early 2007, the Advisory Forum will establish, following consultation with the Scientific Committee, a number of priority projects accordingly.

III.d Promoting coherence in risk communications

MB 19.12.2006 – 6a Strategy for cooperation and networking

23. Co-operation in risk communications will continue to be facilitated by the Advisory Forum and its Working Group on Communications. The Advisory Forum Working Group on Communications, established in November 2003, has developed incrementally into a strong network of all communications units joining EFSA, the European Commission and Member States. This forum provides an important mechanism for exchange of information and experiences and is a basis for the co-ordination of communications activities between the national authorities and EFSA.
24. The Advisory Forum and its Working Group on Communications will seek to build on the working practices established thus far to foster co-operation in risk communications. These include:
- early warning on emerging and topical communications issues;
 - pre-notification of press releases, sent under embargo to Members prior to dissemination by EFSA, in order to inform the network, seek input and help Members prepare for and further support communications at national level;
 - evaluation of communications activities and results (case study approach) in order to identify lessons learned and develop best practices; and
 - organisation of workshops and training sessions to raise knowledge and share experiences on risk perception and communications.

Through such dialogue and collaboration, coherence in message development and delivery in the EU is enhanced.

25. In order to further strengthen co-ordination and coherence of communications, it is recommended to:
- engage in 2-way exchange of communication materials, including pre-notification of press releases issued by Member States;
 - develop a common approach for assessing and monitoring public perception on food safety and nutrition in the EU;
 - better support key actors and information multipliers in Member States in order to reach consumers with messages adapted to their needs and concerns; and
 - develop strategies and guidance documents on sensitive communications issues.
26. Initial work has already been undertaken by a task force on Collaboration in Communications established by the Advisory Forum Working Group on Communications in 2006. The task force has identified a range of communications activities which will be further developed by the end of 2007. These include facilitating greater two-way exchange between members of communications issues, activities and materials. The Working Group is also considering a range of activities mainly focusing on strengthening collaboration between EFSA and the Member States, including the possible organisation of joint communications initiatives.

IV. STRENGTHENING MEMBER STATES' COOPERATION THROUGH THE ADVISORY FORUM IN COLLABORATION WITH THE SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE

MB 19.12.2006 – 6a Strategy for cooperation and networking

27. In accordance with EU Regulation 178/2002, the Advisory Forum will assist the Executive Director to implement this Strategy by:

- Establishing ‘Focal Points’ in the MS as regards the national networks composed of risk managers, national authorities, research institutes, stakeholders and consumers in the field of risk assessments on food and feed safety; animal and plant health; animal welfare and nutrition. The composition of these focal points will be decided upon by the individual Member States. The network of focal points will be responsible for the organisation and co-ordination of risk assessment institutes in the Member States and will be closely involved in the preparation and implementation of the Authority’s and national authorities Work Programmes. The focal points keep EFSA and the other AF Members informed of developments as regards risk assessments and science in their countries as well as on communications within the areas of the AF’s responsibility.
- Considering EFSA’s and the National Authorities’ Working Programmes (short, medium and long term) for priority setting and in order to identify joint working activities. The network of focal points also discusses possible resources to be utilized and explores the co-financing of organisations operating in the fields of EFSA’s mission according to Article 36³ of EU Regulation 178/2002.
- Giving particularly attention to the establishment of a database of national experts and, with respect to emerging risks and urgent situations, to the preparation and facilitation of a network of risk assessment bodies and institutes which have to deal with these.

³ This strategy covers the complete framework for cooperation and networking between the EU Member States and EFSA. It is in line with the specific tools foreseen in the legislation for cooperation especially Article 36 of Regulation 178/2002 and its implementing act Regulation 2230/2204. These will form part and complement this broader strategy when implementing its initiatives.

MB 19.12.2006 – 6a Strategy for cooperation and networking

- Supporting EFSA’s Scientific Committee and the Scientific Panels, where appropriate, as to:
 - steering Advisory Forum Working Groups carrying out preparatory work and submitting proposals as regards the harmonisation of risk assessment methodologies. This will enable EFSA and the national authorities to exchange data, studies and assessments in accordance with ‘good risk assessment practices’ thus avoiding redoing these;
 - steering Advisory Forum Working Groups on projects identified in MS and conducted in collaboration with EFSA and national authorities with the aim of preparing scientific reports for consideration by the Scientific Committee or Panels concerned; and
 - managing and facilitating ad hoc liaison groups between EFSA’s scientific secretariat and secretariats of the scientific advisory committees/bodies in the Member State(s) dealing with the same subjects. Through these liaison groups, information, relevant data, etc. can be exchanged and AF Members can be updated on progress of relevant risk assessments.
 - Raising the profile of risk assessment institutes in the EU in order to make their working practices and products better known as well as the collaborative manner in which these have been obtained.
28. The Scientific Committee will be consulted in the definition and priority setting of possible projects for scientific cooperation between EFSA and the Member States. In addition, the Scientific Committee and Panels may initiate work for cooperative tasks with the Member States such as the collection and analysis of relevant scientific and technical data for a future risk assessment. In order to ensure continued support, the Scientific Committee will regularly discuss the progress of ongoing scientific cooperation programmes.
29. Once the projects have been completed and the reports and recommendations from the Advisory Forum Working Groups have been discussed and endorsed by the Advisory Forum, they may be sent to the Scientific Committee, or appropriate Panel(s), to assist them in the development of an opinion, statement or guidance.

V. CONCLUSIONS

30. Strengthening cooperation and networking between Member States and EFSA will enhance coherence in risk assessment and communications. This in turn will contribute to increased consumer protection and ultimately, help to build confidence of consumers, stakeholders and all interested parties in the EU food safety system.
31. Implementation of the Strategy for Cooperation and Networking between the EU Member States and EFSA will secure tangible benefits for the Community including:
- Enhancement of the quality, coherence and effectiveness of European risk assessment through the development of common approaches and use of information, expertise and resources.
 - Stronger contribution and support of risk assessors to risk managers in the decision making process, both at national and European level.
 - A more efficient risk assessment system allowing a better distribution of work, further sharing of regulatory risk assessments, easier access to expertise not available at home and, in general, the most effective use of sparse and finite resources.
 - The development and dissemination of timely, relevant and consistent risk communications messages tailored to address the needs and expectations of key audiences across the EU.
32. Four priority areas have been identified to enhance the cooperation and networking between the MS and EFSA:
- a. Exchanging and collecting scientific data and information;
 - b. Sharing risk assessments practices;
 - c. Contributing to the harmonisation of methodologies for risk assessments and
 - d. Promoting coherence in risk communications.
33. Advisory Forum members will establish EFSA's 'focal points' in the Member States as regards the national networks composed of risk managers, national authorities, research institutes, consumers and other stakeholders in the field of risk assessments on food and feed safety; nutrition; animal health and welfare; plant health and plant protection. The network of focal points will be responsible for the organisation and co-ordination of risk assessment institutes in the Member States and will be closely involved in the preparation and implementation of the Authority's and national authorities Work Programmes.
34. The Advisory Forum will develop a list of projects as part of further strengthening the cooperation and networking between the Member States and EFSA. The Scientific Committee and/or Panels will be consulted in the definition and priority setting of these projects. Where relevant to EFSA's work programme, the outputs from the Advisory Forum working groups may help prepare and contribute to the independent risk assessments being carried out by EFSA's Scientific Committee and Panels. Moreover, Scientific Committee and/or Panel experts may participate as observers in the Advisory Forum working groups executing these projects. The cooperation will

MB 19.12.2006 – 6a Strategy for cooperation and networking

be implemented in full respect of the legal separation of roles, responsibilities and independency of the Scientific Committee and Panels and of the Advisory Forum.

35. The Advisory Forum Working Group on Communications will further strengthen its collaboration, seeking to facilitate greater two-way exchange and co-ordination of communications, including the organization of joint activities in areas of mutual interest.
36. This Strategy will be presented to the Management Board for endorsement. Afterwards it will be circulated and presented to the EU Institutions, to EU- and - through the Advisory Forum - national stakeholders and to international organisations. The Strategy will be reviewed within two years. The Management Board will consider progress reports on a regular basis and in the beginning twice a year.