

Invited paper

The fifth anniversary of the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA): Mission, organization, functioning and main results

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Available online 8 December 2007

Abstract

The European Food Safety Authority (EFSA), founded by Regulation EC 178/2002, is now in its fifth year of activity and has already gone through a positive external evaluation procedure. This paper takes the reader through the many objectives of this Organization in defining the mission of EFSA as well as the organizational structure that has been developed so far in order to meet the many challenges confronting food safety in Europe. EFSA's working procedures are also analyzed especially in relation to the main task of ensuring high transparency and quality of the outcome. As indicated by the many results reviewed in the present paper mainly in the domains of risk assessment and risk communication, EFSA's taking off has been very successful so far. EFSA is currently working at the forefront of science on a number of difficult issues such as, among others: (i) risk assessment of compound which are both genotoxic and carcinogenic; (ii) safety of botanicals and botanical preparations; (iii) qualified presumption of safety for micro-organisms; (iv) risk–benefit assessment; (v) nutrition and health claims; and (vi) safety of food derived from animal clones and their offsprings. The next future of EFSA will be strongly characterized by the completion and consolidation of its structure and by the further strengthening of scientific cooperation with institutions/organizations in Member States and at an international level.

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1. Introduction

In January 2000, the European Commission's "White Paper on Food Safety" highlighted the main European policies and steps forward to build up a food safety system in Europe able to cope with the challenges of the 21st Century. The vision was that of improving and simplifying regulations to ensure safety from "farm to fork" by adopting an operational plan to establish the most sophisticated food safety system in the world for the benefit of the European population.

Seven years after, in January 2006, the main elements of the above-mentioned plan have become reality thanks to a number of regulations and directives adopted at the EU level between 2002 and 2007. It is not by chance that the first Regulation adopted to this end (i.e. Regulation 178/2002) was focused on the establishment of the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) as an essential pillar of the new European food safety system.

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2. EFSA's mission and main areas of activities

The EFSA's mission includes:

- Provision of scientific advice and scientific and technical support in all fields which have a direct or indirect impact on food and feed safety;
- Assessment of emerging and other risks;
- Collection and evaluation of data for characterizing and monitoring risks in food and feed sectors;
- Risk communication in food and feed sectors; and
- Networking and collaboration with institutions and organizations in Member States.

In following its mission, EFSA should:

- *Improve the way risk assessment is carried out in the EU;*
- *Ensure close collaboration with National bodies Authorities.* Obviously, EFSA's scientific opinions are independent and not subject to agreement by National Authorities and national issues remain for national authorities in Member States. On the other hand, there is a need:
 - to ensure that national authorities can input into the work of the EFSA Scientific Committee and Panels;
 - to enable national authorities to comment on opinion issued in draft for general comment; and
 - to seek to avoid duplication of efforts, where possible and desirable.
- *Enable improved collaboration between the many different stakeholders and coordinate their inputs; and*
- *Provide the right information to governments, consumers, industrial, non-governmental organizations and other stakeholders at the right time.*

In the mean time, EFSA cannot: (i) be responsible for food safety/nutrition policy and legislation in the EU; (ii) take charge of food safety controls, labelling or other such issues; or (iii) act as a substitute for national authorities.

The main activities of EFSA are provided in the framework of:

- *General questions:* providing scientific opinions, guidance and advice in response to questions;
- *Authorisations:* assessing the risk of regulated substances and development of proposals for risk-related factors;
- *Monitoring of specific risk factors and diseases* such as BSE/TSE and zoonoses; and
- *Investing in food safety science:* development, promotion and application of new and harmonised scientific approaches and methodologies for hazard and risk assessment either on demand or through self-tasking.

In the present regulatory context, only two European Institutions (i.e. European Commission and European Parliament) and Member States can request opinions to EFSA. Most of the opinions asked so far to EFSA come from the European Commission. Moreover, it is important to note that questions may be asked to EFSA by the European Commission, Parliament or MS under the provisions of Art. 29 of Reg. 178/2002 (*scientific opinions*), which are mainly intended for the Scientific Committee and Panels (see in Fig. 1 the Risk Assessment Department), or under the provision of Art. 31 of Reg. 178/2002 (*technical and scientific assistance*), which are generally intended for the staff of EFSA (see in Fig. 1 the Scientific Cooperation and Assistance Department).

3. Organization of EFSA

From the organization scheme, shown in Fig. 1 downloaded from the EFSA website, it appears that EFSA is organized in three main directorates (i.e. Science, Administration and Communications). The Science Directorate consists of two departments: Risk Assessment with nine Scientific Panels and Scientific Cooperation and Assistance with six units. The Administration Directorate consists of four units and three sections, whereas the Communication Directorate consists of one section and two units. The all structure depends on the Executive Director, assisted by two units (i.e. Scientific Committee and Advisory Forum and External relations and Management Board) under the overall responsibility of the Management Board.

Composition and tasks of the Management Board and of the Advisory Forum are described in Tables 1A and B and 2A and B, respectively.

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