



## Short communication

## Needs and expectations regarding risk ranking in the food chain: A pilot survey amongst decision makers and stakeholders



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## ABSTRACT

Given the large number of potential risks and the increasing budgetary restrictions, risk ranking (RR) is becoming an inevitable part of food safety. Through an online questionnaire survey, we aimed to assess needs and expectations regarding RR in a sample of European decision makers and stakeholders. Responses were collected from 51 participants. The majority expressed a need for RR, and over two thirds already had some experience with RR. The main expectation from RR was an improved transparency in management decisions. The use and impact of RR in the food chain may be improved by increasing knowledge regarding RR, facilitating communication between decision makers and stakeholders, and removing hurdles related to data availability.

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### 1. Introduction

Because of the complex nature of the food chain, it is exposed to a variety of hazards that may constitute a risk for public, animal and plant health. Given the different types of risks and the increasing financial restrictions, it is practically impossible to control each individual risk simultaneously and at the same level. Therefore, choices have to be made. Risk ranking (RR) has been used in the past as a tool to set priorities, assisting decision makers to focus on

the most important food-related health problems and to develop strategies for addressing them (e.g., Hoffmann, 2010; Humblet et al., 2012; Vromman et al. 2014). RR also seems a logical starting point to initiate the reflection about how to reduce population health risks in the most effective manner. Nevertheless, national food safety authorities only recently started to look at RR as a means of informing priority setting (e.g., Cardoen et al., 2009; Mangen et al., 2010).

Both risk assessors and decision makers can use RR, but not necessarily in the same way or starting from the same needs and expectations. RR is often performed by risk assessors as a purely scientific initiative and not always with clear set goals from the beginning regarding prevention or management of the risks. On the other hand, decision makers may have to take measures before the RR process has been initiated or completed. A simple review of the

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scientific literature using keywords such as “risk ranking” and “management”, revealed that little is known on the expectations and needs of managers and stakeholders with respect to RR, although the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) recently stressed the importance of a good interaction between risk assessors and decision makers (EFSA 2012). Therefore, a questionnaire was designed to identify the needs and expectations of a sample of decision makers and stakeholders regarding RR and to understand if and how key players interact.

## 2. Methodology

An online anonymous questionnaire (Annex 1) was developed by a working group of the Scientific Committee of the Belgian Federal Agency for the Safety of the Food Chain (FASFC) in collaboration with the Staff Direction for Risk Assessment of the FASFC. The questionnaire was pre-tested by two decision makers of the FASFC and two members from the Advisory Committee of the FASFC (representative stakeholders of the food chain) and was slightly adapted according to their remarks. The invitation to the online questionnaire was sent electronically to 179 decision makers and stakeholders at national and European levels, all of which had professional activities in the food chain and were known as professional contact points. They had expressed an interest in risk ranking by their early registration for a national symposium on RR in the food chain. The contacted individuals represented decision makers, sector representatives, scientists, and food business operators (Table 1).

The questionnaire was created using Google Drive™ and consisted of four different types of questions, namely: 1) personal information of the respondent; 2) the usefulness/need of RR, 3) the expectations of RR; 4) methodological issues concerning RR. For our purposes, “needs” were defined as motivating forces for performing and applying RR in the food chain. “Expectations” were defined as expected outcomes of RR in the food chain. The questionnaire is available in Annex 1.

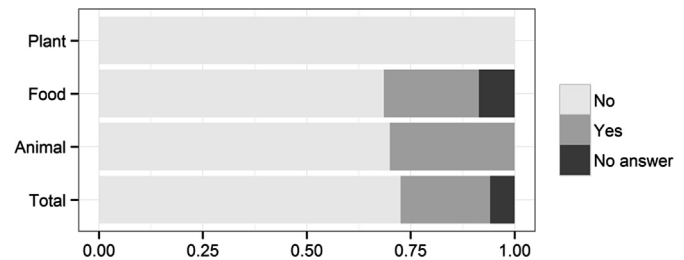
## 3. Results

The online survey before the symposium resulted in a response from 51 food chain decision makers and stakeholders out of the 179

**Table 1**  
Individuals contacted for the online questionnaire on risk ranking.

Group	Number	Sub-total	Total
<i>Decision makers</i>			
National level			
Management of the FASFC	20		
Management of FPS	8		
Ministries	3		
European level			
European Commission	15		
Chief veterinary officers	28		
Chief plant health officers	27		
Management of the European agencies	43	144	
<i>Sector representative</i>			
National level			
	5		
European level			
	2	7	
<i>Scientists</i>			
National level			
	1		
European level			
	1	2	
<i>Food business operators</i>			
National level			
	15		
European level			
	11	26	179

FASFC: Federal Agency for the Safety of the Food Chain; FPS: Federal Public Service Public Health, Safety of the Food Chain and Environment.



**Fig. 1.** Proportions of decision makers and stakeholders that did receive training in Risk Ranking based on the results of an online questionnaire (N = 51).

contacted persons, i.e., a response rate of 28%. The profile of the respondents (if mentioned) was mainly decision maker (34), followed by sector representative (8), food business operator (4), and scientist (3). The fields of competency were food safety in general (35), animal health (10), and plant health (6). The median years of professional experience was 14.5 years with little variation in years of experience between the fields of competency.

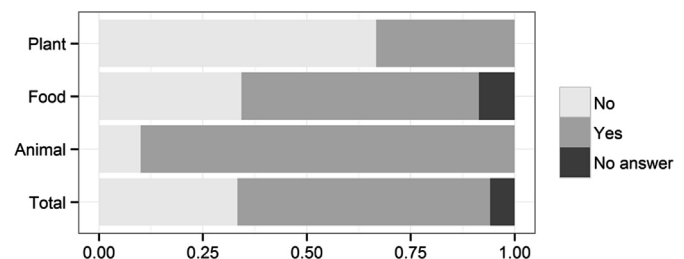
Some qualitative open questions showed that communication between risk assessors (i.e., scientists) and decision makers could be improved through two way interactions, workshops, and RR as a joint exercise. The qualitative open question on the expectations of RR revealed that respondents expected an RR to result especially in more transparency (24/51 or 47%) and in a priority setting aiding management decisions (24/51 or 47%). Further expectations were a quantitative approach (12/51 or 24%) rather than a qualitative approach (3/51 or 6%), as well as a correct assessment of the uncertainty (9/51 or 18%) and a standardized and scientific approach (4/51 or 8%).

Thirty five respondents (69%) answered that they had already conducted an RR exercise in the past, of which 13 less than one month ago, 19 less than one year ago and 3 more than one year ago. Eight respondents (16%) indicated that they did not see a need for conducting an RR.

The reasons for conducting an RR in professional activities or organisations were, in decreasing order, public health assessments (32), policy preparation (27), budget (22) and the need of an RR in reports on trade (2). The majority of these RR exercises had been conducted at the national level (31), followed by the local (7), European (7), regional (2) and global (2) level.

The reason for not performing a structured RR was in 38% of the cases the lack of knowledge on how to do this.

Fig. 1 shows that most decision makers and stakeholders active in the food chain had not received any formal training in RR until now. This is in contrast with higher proportions of the respondents reporting to have read and consulted RR literature (Fig. 2).



**Fig. 2.** Proportions of decision makers and stakeholders that read and consulted reports on Risk Ranking, based on the results of an online questionnaire (N = 51).

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