

The European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) Becomes Reality

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Growing consumer concern about the safety of the food supply came to a head across Europe with the debacle over BSE “mad cow” disease. As part of a move to restore consumer confidence in Europe’s ability to guarantee food safety and quality, the European institutions agreed to create an independent European Food Safety Authority (EFSA). Meanwhile, EFSA has become more than an entity on paper and is expected to be running at full capacity from 2004/5. But what is it and what will it actually do?

The European Food Safety Authority aims to position itself in the public mind as the independent guardian of food safety in the EU with a strong scientific focus. It should be the first point of reference for expertise on food safety.

EFSA’s organisational structure

The Authority, or EFSA as it has become known, is composed of four separate components, with tasks ranging from general management to scientific analysis.

The Management Board establishes the Authority’s draft budget and work programmes, and monitors their implementation. It also appoints members of the Scientific Committee and panels, and agrees on internal rules and regulations.

The Executive Director is Geoffrey Podger, formerly head of the UK’s Food Standards Agency. He was appointed in December 2002 for five years. The Executive Director manages the day-to-day running of EFSA and appoints its technical, scientific, administrative, and communications staff.

The Advisory Forum is made up of representatives of each Member State’s national food agency, if one exists, or of national officials dealing with food safety issues. It assists the Executive Director and aims to improve co-ordination and communication between Member States, who often have to deal with the same food safety issues at the national level.

Finally, the Scientific Committee and eight panels of experts, give independent scientific and technical opinions to help EFSA carry out risk assessments. The aim The Committee and panels replaced scientific committees that worked for the European Commission in the past.

Assessing risk and explaining it to the public

EFSA’s primary responsibility is to provide independent scientific advice on all matters with a direct or indirect impact on food safety. It will also give advice on genetically modified organisms that are not intended for food and feed, and on certain aspects of nutrition.

However, while EFSA will provide the European Commission with assessments of products, substances, processes, and even situations, the Commission will continue to be in charge of proposing what action to take.

In cases where it is necessary to pass on information to the public, EFSA has a crucial role in communications. With the help of the national representatives sitting on the Advisory Forum, the Authority hopes to be able to put incidents involving food into a context that consumers can understand, and to explain the extent of any risk in a clear and balanced way.

Effective communication is key
to gaining the confidence of
consumers and the respect of
anyone with an interest in food
safety

Building up to be fully up-and-running

EFSA is now recruiting staff (up to 250 people) so that it will be operating at full capacity by 2004. It has already begun some scientific work, taking over from previous scientific committees under the aegis of the European Commission in May 2003. Mr. Podger, EFSA's Executive Director, says, "... the all important scientific build-up of the Authority is well under way. As many people in the food community know, we have recently set up our Advisory Forum, which comprises representatives of the existing EU Member States, as well as observers from the new member countries. This enables us to sit at the heart of an important network, as opposed to being just a single organisation."