



Consumer Voice

Newsletter on food safety, health and consumer policy
from the European Commission's Health and Consumer Protection DG

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sumer Protection

Key legislation establishes new EU food safety system

When this Commission took office in September 1999, we committed ourselves to taking urgent action to address the serious concerns of consumers about the safety of their daily food. That is what we have delivered, and in record time. The European Food Safety Authority will be up and running in 2002 as promised.

My proposals to create this new Authority began as a result of current public and political concerns about food safety. The ongoing BSE saga, the dioxin crisis, concerns over the use of anti-microbial feed additives and the use of growth promoting hormones in cattle, all served to undermine confidence in the ability of the public authorities to protect consumer interests.

Aware that those concerns were profound, the Commission proposed to establish the EFSA and to make it responsible for providing independent scientific advice to support EU action on food safety and for giving clear, accurate and easily understood information directly to the public. To have adopted the resulting legislation so quickly is a great achievement for food safety in the EU. It shows how effective the European institutions can be when it comes to solving problems close to the hearts and minds of EU citizens.

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Full steam ahead for the European Food Safety Authority

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The eagerly awaited European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) is set to become a reality before the end of the year. The seal of approval making it possible was given on 21 January 2002, when the Council of Ministers adopted the key legislation that provides the legal basis for establishing the EFSA and a new framework for EU food law.

Despite the complexity of the legislation, which also covers the general principles and requirements of food law and procedures in matters of food safety, the Member States in Council and all political groups in the European Parliament have dealt with the adoption in record time. This completes the first phase of the wide ranging reforms of EU food law launched by Commissioner David Byrne in the January 2000 White Paper on Food Safety.

Full steam ahead is how it all began and that is how it will continue to get the EFSA up and running. Swinging into immediate action on adoption of the Regulation, the Commission initiated some of the practical measures that need to be taken.



▲ Commissioner David Byrne with some of the Commission team who will carry out the preparatory work until hand over to the future EFSA management.

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EFSA responsibilities

- The scientific evaluation of risks.
- The collection and analysis of scientific data.
- Safety evaluations of dossiers put forward by industry for EU level approval of substances or processes.
- Identification of emerging risks.
- Scientific support to the Commission, particularly in the case of a food safety crisis.
- Direct communication to the public on issues coming within its responsibility.
- EFSA will be included in the Rapid Alert System that will remain, as it is now, managed by the Commission.



▲ Sound Science to back up EU food safety action.

The first and most important step is to begin the search throughout the EU to identify and nominate the Management Board and an Executive Director for the EFSA. These appointments must be in place before the members of the Scientific Committee and the Scientific Panels of the Authority can be appointed. Only then will the EFSA become fully and independently operational and able to give scientific advice.

Until the EFSA management is in place, the Commission will continue with the work necessary to bring the Authority to the point where the future management can take over the reins. Temporary quarters have been found to house the EFSA in Brussels. The current Scientific Committees working for the Commission, will continue to provide scientific advice on food safety and other related matters until the EFSA Scientific Committee and Panels are in place. The Commission has brought together an Interim Scientific Advisory Forum to facilitate preparatory work in the run up to full operation.

Sound Science to back up EU food safety action

The primary responsibility of the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) is to provide independent scientific advice to support EU action on food safety. EFSA has been given a wide brief, so that it can cover all stages of food production and supply, from primary production to the safety of animal feed, right through to the supply of food to consumers.

The Authority will gather information from all parts of the globe, keeping a weather eye on new developments in science. It will share its findings and listen to the views of others through a vast network that will be developed over time. As well as interacting with experts and decision makers on many levels, EFSA will communicate directly with the public on its areas of responsibility.

Although EFSA's main "customer" will be the Commission, it will be open to respond to scientific questions from the European Parliament and the Member States and it can also initiate scientific investigation on its own behalf. EFSA will carry out assessments of risks to the food chain and indeed can carry out scientific assessment on any matter that may have a direct or indirect effect on the safety of the food supply, including matters relating to animal health, animal welfare and plant health. The Authority will also give scientific advice on non-food and feed GMOs, and on nutrition, particularly in relation to Community legislation.

Providing scientific advice

Unlike the present situation where the scientific committees are established to advise the Commission, the EFSA may be requested to give scientific opinions by the Commission, Member States and the European Parliament. It may also initiate its own inquiries.

The independent Scientific Committee and the Panels are responsible for providing the EFSA's scientific opinions and are at the heart of its work. Their tasks include the evaluation of risks and the safety assessment of substances or processes. The opinions of the Scientific Committee and Panels will be published in full on the EFSA website together with any minority opinions. The Scientific Committee and

the Panels can form working groups of additional experts on specialised subjects so as to draw on the best scientific advice available in the EU and, when necessary, beyond.

The Scientific Committee and the Panels will be supported by EFSA's own in-house scientific personnel and the extensive networks of specialised institutes in the Member States. This will allow the members of the Scientific Committee and Panels to focus on their core business - risk assessment. EFSA will collect and analyse scientific data which will allow proactive identification of emerging risks so as to allow the risk managers to take early preventative measures.

Communicating directly with the public

An ability to communicate well will be absolutely essential to all EFSA functions. Not only will the Authority need to communicate its complex scientific advice in a way that is useful to its clients but it will be expected to communicate, direct to the public, clear, accurate and easily understood information on food risks. The EFSA will be active in its approach to communication to ensure that new scientific information concerning risks in the food supply are made widely available as soon as problems are identified. It will publish all its findings, information concerning its activities, and will act in an open and transparent manner.

Networking across borders

The EFSA will come to be known as an outstanding networking organisation. Working on the basis of a scientific cooperation framework, EFSA will coordinate and participate in cross border activities and exchanges of data and information. It will develop and implement joint projects, exchange of expertise and of best practices. Initially, the networks will be limited to the Member States, but it is to be expected that they will be extended by means of cooperation agreements, to include the European Economic Area. Account needs also to be taken of the forthcoming enlargement of the EU.

Effective and efficient management

Substantial resources are allocated to the EFSA. The Authority could employ up to 250 people within three years to support EU food safety measures with sound scientific advice. Working closely with - but independent of - the Commission, EFSA will assess risks to the food chain and advise the Commission, responsible for managing those risks. In the past, the Commission was responsible for both risk assessment and risk management but without the level of resources available to the EFSA. In the past also, there was no single EU organisation that could be approached by the Member States or by the European Parliament for independent scientific advice.

EFSA is set to become a one-stop-shop for the EU but it will not advise from an elitist or solitary point of view. Considerable thought has been given to how independence, good management, sound science and good communications can be ensured. Much of that is embodied in the legal base that clearly sets out the parameters of the brief. But a great deal comes down to the excellence of the people who will be employed by the Authority.



▲ Scientific Committees continuing to provide scientific advice on food safety and other related matters.

Road map to the EFSA

December 2001

- The European Parliament adopted in its second reading an amended text that is acceptable to the Commission and the Council.
- At the European Summit in Laeken, Heads of State decided to start the EFSA temporarily in Brussels.

January 2002

- Adoption of the Regulation establishing the EFSA by Council of Ministers.
- European Food Safety Authority website goes live, initially providing background information on the Authority and announcing calls for expressions of interest. The site will be progressively developed.

February 2002

- Publication of the call for expression of interest for the future Management Board in the Official Journal of the EU (OJ), in newspapers across Europe and on the EFSA and DG for Health and Consumer Protection websites.
- Regulation establishing EFSA published in the OJ. It enters into force 20 days later.
- Publication of notice of the post of Executive Director on the DG for Health and Consumer Protection and EFSA websites, in the OJ and in newspapers across Europe.

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Road map to the EFSA

March 2002

- Commission Decision on a list of Candidates, substantially greater than the number of Members for the EFSA Management Board, transmitted to the Council and Parliament.
- Commission undertakes preparatory work to assist the Authority with the early establishment of a list of candidates for nomination as independent members in the Scientific Committee and Panels.

May/June 2002

- European Parliament makes its views on the candidates to the Management Board known to the Council.
- European Council nominates the Members of the Management Board.

June 2002

- First meeting of the Management Board.
- Commission Decision on a list of candidates for Executive Director transmitted to the Management Board.
- Management Board selects its candidate for Executive Director.

July 2002

- Executive Director candidate makes a presentation to the Plenary of the European Parliament.

September 2002 onwards

- Executive Director takes up office.
- EFSA nominates the members of the Scientific Committee and Panels. When their names are published in the OJ, the EFSA becomes legally responsible for scientific opinions on food safety and related issues. DG for Health and Consumer Protection ceases to have responsibility for scientific committees in the field of EFSA.
- New Scientific Committee and Panels hold first meetings.

The EFSA People

The *EFSA Management Board* will monitor the work of the Authority to ensure that it functions efficiently and within a culture of independence and transparency. The Board includes 14 members and one Commission representative. The 14 members will be appointed by the Council, in consultation with the European Parliament, on the basis of a list drawn up by the Commission. A high standard of competence will be required and a broad range of relevant expertise. Consistent with these qualities, a wide geographic distribution of members from within the EU will be the criteria for appointment. Four of the 14 members should have a background in organisations representing consumers and other interests in the food chain. These members do not have to be members of these organisations but have background experience, past or present, in these types of organisations. The Commission will put together the list of candidates for selection from a widely advertised public call for expressions of interest.

The Executive Director will be responsible for the day to day management of the Authority and answerable to the Management Board. The post will be widely advertised through the Official Journal of the EU (OJ), in newspapers throughout Europe and on the EFSA website. From the response to this call, a list of candidates will be put together by the Commission for the Management Board who will appoint the Executive Director for a period of five years. However, before the appointment is finalised, the candidate nominated by the Management Board will be invited to speak to the European Parliament and to answer questions put by its members.

One of the first tasks of the Executive Director will be to present a proposal for the set up of the EFSA's new Scientific Committee and Panels, and to start recruiting the necessary specialised staff for the administrative and scientific work of the Authority. The Executive Director will also be in charge of convening the Advisory Forum.

The Advisory Forum will be made up of people who work on comparable tasks to those carried out by the EFSA, and there will be one from each Member State. Most probably, these experts will come from national agencies or bodies that carry out risk assessments in the food sector. Their close involvement is essential to ensure efficient networking with national scientific organisations and to act as a conduit for exchanging information on potential risks or for sharing knowledge.

To access the EFSA website please go to: <http://www.efsa.eu.int/>

For Commission press releases and other information about the EFSA in the lead up to adoption of the Regulation, please go to DG for Health and Consumer Protection website: http://europa.eu.int/comm/food/fs/efsa/index_en.html

For the full text of the European Parliament and Council Regulation laying down the general principles and requirements of food law, establishing the European Food Safety Authority and laying down procedures in matters of food safety, please go to: <http://register.consilium.eu.int/pdf/en/02/st03/03602en2.pdf>