How EFSA Communicates Risk

Anne Laure Gassin e Daniel Glanville

Sintesi a cura di Franca Braga

L'Autorità Europea per la Sicurezza Alimentare (EFSA) è stata creata nel 2002, dopo una lunga serie di crisi alimentari (BSE, diossine...) che, alla fine degli anni '90, hanno minato la fiducia del consumatore nella sicurezza alimentare e anche nella capacità da parte delle Autorità di proteggere sufficientemente gli interessi del consumatore stesso.

Il compito dell'EFSA è quello di fornire alla Commissione europea, al Parlamento europeo come pure a tutti gli Stati membri dell'Unione opinioni scientifiche indipendenti su tutti i temi che riguardano la sicurezza degli alimenti e dei mangimi. L'EFSA è quindi responsabile della valutazione del rischio, mentre la gestione del rischio resta competenza delle Autorità politiche.

Questa chiara divisione delle competenze è stata stabilita come principio di base al momento della creazione dell'EFSA.

La comunicazione del rischio è, al contrario, una responsabilità condivisa tra l'EFSA e gli organismi deputati alla gestione del rischio.

È importante ricordare che la valutazione del rischio è compito del Comitato scientifico e di nove *panel* scientifici, ciascuno dei quali è composto da esperti esterni specializzati in particolari e specifici settori.

In termini di comunicazione lo scopo primario dell'EFSA è quello di divulgare le notizie scientifiche in modo chiaro e comprensibile, raggiungendo con un'informazione accurata e tempestiva tutti gli *stakeholder* e anche il pubblico generale.

Per rispondere a questi obiettivi di comunicazione l'EFSA deve :

- studiare e conoscere la percezione del rischio da parte del consumatore;
- creare un ponte, un legame, tra scienza e consumatore;
- supportare gli organismi preposti alla comunicazione, come le Autorità nazionali per la sicurezza alimentare, per garantire che arrivino ai consumatori messaggi corretti;
- promuovere una coerente comunicazione del rischio tra chi valuta e chi gestisce il rischio.

Per meglio conoscere e comprendere la percezione del consumatore, l'EFSA e la Commissione europea hanno svolto un'ampia indagine nell'autunno 2005. È stato valutato il livello di preoccupazione del consumatore europeo nei confronti di diverse problematiche alimentari ed è emerso che i maggiori timori

Anne Laure Gassin
Direttore della Comunicazione EFSA
Daniel Glanville
Dipartimento di Comunicazione EFSA
Franca Braga
Altroconsumo Associazione Indipendente di Consumatori

riguardano pesticidi, influenza aviaria, residui nella carne, problemi igienici nella ristorazione fuori casa e contaminazioni batteriche. Interessante anche il quadro della percezione del rischio per nazione con differenze significative, che dovranno essere tenute presenti nelle politiche di comunicazione.

L'indagine ha anche valutato la credibilità delle diverse fonti d'informazione. Sono ritenuti affidabili associazioni di consumatori, medici, scienziati. Minore è la credibilità delle Autorità e ancor meno dei media.

Le modalità di comunicazione scelte e adottate dall'EFSA sono molteplici e, ovviamente, cambiano in funzione dell'interlocutore che si vuole raggiungere come pure del contenuto del messaggio.

Tutte le opinioni scientifiche del Comitato scientifico e dei panel sono pubblicate integralmente e in forma di riassunto sul sito internet dell'EFSA.

A tutti gli interessati vengono inviati aggiornamenti via e-mail sul lavoro dell'EFSA.

Nel caso di temi che lo rendano utile e necessario, l'EFSA fornisce anche informazioni e spiegazioni delle problematiche rivolte a un pubblico non scientifico (FAQ, note esplicative...).

Qualora i temi in questione siano d'interesse pubblico e di attualità, l'EFSA comunica anche attraverso comunicati stampa, nel 2005 ne sono stati redatti 46, ed eventualmente organizza conferenze stampa o seminari rivolti agli organi d'informazione.

Il mezzo di comunicazione più usato resta indubbiamente il sito Internet, che è diventato un vero e proprio punto di riferimento per l'informazione sulla sicurezza alimentare. Nel mese di gennaio 2006 è stata anche condotta un'indagine via Internet per meglio identificare le richieste degli utilizzatori del sito. Sulla base dei risultati il sito è stato rinnovato e ristrutturato.

Ultimamente si è fatto ricorso anche alla più recente tecnologia informatica, trasmettendo sul sito - in diretta - alcune riunioni del *Management Board* come pure la conferenza stampa che annunciava l'adozione dell'opinione scientifica sull'aspartame.

Terminata la presentazione teorica, è interessante osservare alcuni casi specifici recenti di crisi alimentari e quindi di comunicazione del rischio da parte dell'EFSA, cercando di farne un bilancio e di trarne delle indicazioni per il futuro.

ITX nel latte per l'infanzia

L'ITX, isopropiltioxantone, è una sostanza utilizzata negli inchiostri per un tipo di stampa degli imballaggi per alimenti, compresi quelli in cartoncino poliaccoppiato usati per i latti liquidi per la prima infanzia. Nel corso del 2005 tracce di tale sostanza sono state riscontrate in alcuni latti prima infanzia da un laboratorio italiano durante una serie di controlli di routine. Nel mese di novembre 2005 le Autorità italiane hanno annunciato il ritiro dal mercato di 30 milioni di litri di latte liquido per l'infanzia. Molti produttori hanno poi ritirato spontaneamente dalla vendita i loro prodotti in tutti i paesi europei. La Commissione europea ha

chiesto all'EFSA un'opinione scientifica sull'ITX con una procedura di alta priorità. La risonanza sui media, in particolare in Italia, è stata molto alta e l'allarme si è diffuso prima che l'EFSA avesse fornito una risposta scientifica alla crisi in corso, risposta che è arrivata il 7 dicembre, fornendo, da una parte, una risposta rassicurante sui pericoli immediati di una simile contaminazione, dall'altra sottolineando la necessità di nuovi studi, qualora si fosse deciso di continuare a usare tale sostanza con rischio di una contaminazione degli alimenti.

Si è trattato evidentemente di un'emergenza di difficile gestione, che ha evidenziato la necessità di un'informazione proattiva e diretta ai consumatori da parte delle Autorità nazionali per la sicurezza alimentare. In seguito all'adozione dell'opinione dell'EFSA, peraltro chiaramente spiegata sul sito Web con il supporto anche di una serie di FAQ, l'informazione sui media, che aveva assunto toni allarmistici, è stata rettificata e bilanciata e il messaggio chiave è stato indubbiamente recepito.

Aspartame

L'allarme è scattato sulla base di uno studio condotto dalla Fondazione Europea Ramazzini di Bologna e riguardava la possibile cancerogenicità dell'aspartame, un dolcificante di sintesi ampiamente utilizzato nei prodotti alimentari. Questo rappresenta un buon esempio, da parte dell'EFSA, di un intervento accurato, preciso e tempestivo nei confronti dei media su una tematica di elevato interesse pubblico, che ha permesso una comunicazione corretta ed equilibrata al consumatore.

I risultati dello studio in questione sono stati pubblicamente annunciati nel luglio 2005. L'intervento dell'EFSA è stato immediato e pubblico, preannunciando una seria e accurata valutazione dei risultati dello studio. Il 5 maggio 2006 è arrivato il parere scientifico che ha rassicurato l'opinione pubblica, affermando che non esiste al momento la necessità di rivedere i limiti di utilizzo per l'aspartame.

BSE nelle capre

Nell'ottobre 2004 le Autorità francesi e la Commissione europea hanno informato circa il sospetto di un caso di BSE in una capra in Francia. L'EFSA è stata immediatamente coinvolta ed è stata richiesta un'opinione anche riguardo la sicurezza del latte di capra. Nel gennaio 2005 la BSE nelle capre è stata confermata. Nel mese di giugno il panel scientifico dell'EFSA ha reso nota la sua opinione, pubblicando un comunicato stampa e organizzando un incontro con la stampa. Il risultato è giudicato positivo in quanto il messaggio equilibrato e rassicurante dell'EFSA è stato coerentemente ripreso in tutta Europa.

Concludendo, l'EFSA è un'organizzazione recente, che ha comunque già dimostrato di essere in grado di produrre informazione scientifica indipendente, comunicando in maniera trasparente e proattiva. L'arrivo del nuovo direttore esecutivo, Catherine Gislain-Lancelle, ha dato un ulteriore impulso alla struttura, in particolare per quanto riguarda l'attività di comunicazione.

About EFSA

The European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) was created in 2002 following a series of food crises in the late 1990s in Europe (e.g. bse, dioxins, etc.) which damaged consumer confidence in food safety and the ability of authorities to fully protect consumer interests.

European governments decided to establish a new advisory body with the task of providing independent scientific advice on food and feed safety issues to the European Commission, European Parliament and Member States of the European Union (EU) who continue to take risk management decisions. This fundamental division of competences - risk assessment on the one hand, risk management on the other - was thus established as a basic principle of food safety policy with the creation of EFSA.

EFSA is thus the cornerstone of EU risk assessment regarding food and feed safety. EFSA's core activity is to provide independent scientific advice on all matters linked to food and feed safety including animal health and welfare and plant protection. The issues EFSA deals with are relevant across the EU of 25 Member States with a population of almost half a billion citizens - a big responsibility for a relatively small public body.

EFSA's risk assessments are carried out by its Scientific Committee and nine Scientific Panels, each of which is composed of external experts specialised in different aspects of food and feed safety. Appointed for a three-year term which is renewable, it is their role to address scientific questions and provide independent opinions on matters within their respective remits. In addition to the Panels and Scientific Committee, a number of other external Expert Working Groups have been established to deal with specific subjects.

Although EFSA's main "customers" are the organisations who commission work to EFSA (ie the European Commission, European Parliament and Member States), and while much of EFSA's scientific work is highly technical and specialised, food safety issues are important to everybody. EFSA's work is therefore of interest to a wide range of audiences and ultimately to the general consumer.

For this reason, the work of the Authority can essentially be divided into two main fields: risk assessment and risk communication. Communicating on existing and emerging risks is an important part of EFSA's work, in addition to providing scientific advice on food and feed safety issues. But EFSA alone cannot communicate directly with consumers across all of the 25 EU Member States - this would be an impossible task. Nor is it desirable to communicate about risks associated with the food chain without informing consumers about the measures taken to prevent, address and/or minimize such risks. As illustrated in Fig. 1, while risk assessment and risk management are carried out separately by different authorities, risk communication is therefore a shared responsibility of risk assessors and risk managers.

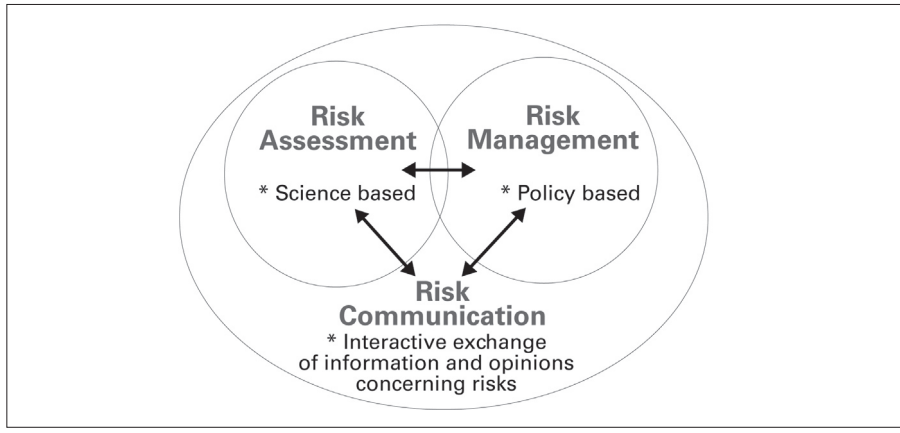
To make sure consumers receive the right type of information through channels they are familiar with and in a format they can best understand, EFSA

needs to act in partnership with the bodies responsible for food safety in the EU Member States, in particular food safety authorities responsible for risk assessment at national level. EFSA communicates by working closely with these national authorities and in open consultation with its stakeholders.

– Risk Assessment – EFSA*'s scientific experts provide the European Commission, the European Parliament and Member States with a sound scientific basis on which to base legislation, policies and decisions related to food and feed safety.* EFSA*'s Scientific Committee and Panels carry out risk assessments on all matters linked to food and feed safety, animal health and welfare, plant protection and plant health.* EFSA *is also consulted on nutritional issues in relation to Community legislation and policies.*

– Risk Communication – *Communicating* EFSA*'s own initiatives and ensuring coherence among the EU governments when communicating with the public on food safety issues is important for maintaining consumer confidence in the risk assessment process.* EFSA *strives to make sure that all interested parties and the public at large receive timely, reliable, objective and meaningful information based on the risk assessments and scientific advice of its experts.*

Fig. 1 – Risk Analysis Framework



Source: *Jouve, 2000, who export consultation, Kiel, Germany, 21-23 March.*

Communicating risk: objectives

EFSA's primary aim is to communicate scientific information in a clear and understandable way. The goal is to offer consistent, accurate and timely information for stakeholders and the public at large. EFSA's Communications team works closely with EFSA scientists in order to ensure that scientific risk assessments are accurately translated into meaningful communications to the public. This is key

to establishing the Authority as an organisation dedicated to scientific excellence, openness and transparency.
In order to achieve these objectives, EFSA strives to:

Understanding consumer and public perception of food risk and risks associated with the food chain

Many factors influence consumer attitudes to food and food safety such as public perception of risk, reactions to potential risk and willingness to accept scientific uncertainty surrounding risk. The development of effective risk communication messages therefore requires an in-depth knowledge of target audiences including their level of awareness and understanding of food safety issues, their attitudes to food and food safety and the appropriate channels for effective dissemination of messages.

Bridging the gap between science and the consumer

In order to be effective, risk communication must explain and contextualize risk. In developing public communication, EFSA seeks to translate scientific evidence into clear, accessible and meaningful messages, addressing the needs of key audiences. In addition to explaining risk assessment findings, risk communication must also, where required, provide clear advice to the recipients as to whether individual action is required and set out clearly any action steps recommended for governments and/or industry.

Harnessing support of key actors in order to reach consumers with pertinent and effective messages

EFSA seeks to involve national food safety authorities in Member States and stakeholders both in the development and dissemination of its scientific advice in order to ensure that messages are culturally sensitive and address appropriately public concerns. In the development and dissemination of risk communication messages, EFSA liaises closely with national food safety authorities and associates the European Commission, while seeking to involve stakeholders from consumer associations and other NGOs as well as industry.

Promoting coherent risk communication across the Risk Assessment/ Risk Management interface

As highlighted above, risk communication is a joint responsibility of risk assessors and risk managers. EFSA's own role in risk communication is to inform risk managers, national authorities, stakeholders and the public at large about food and feed safety issues and to provide scientific advice in an open and transparent manner. Such an approach is particularly important where a risk in the food chain has been identified and confirmed and an increase in public awareness is required.

Understanding public perception of risk

Consumer research on risk perception

EFSA and the European Commission commissioned a Europe wide survey to investigate the views of consumers on risks associated with the food chain, which was carried out in the autumn of 2005. The findings from this research provide invaluable input regarding consumer attitudes to risk, perceptions and concerns regarding food safety as well as the role of public authorities in addressing concerns and ensuring the safety of the food chain. It is intended that this survey be repeated in future in order to evaluate trends in public perception over time and to help monitor the effectiveness of public policies. Fig. 2 to 4 summarise some of the findings.

Fig. 2 – Food-related risks - prompted

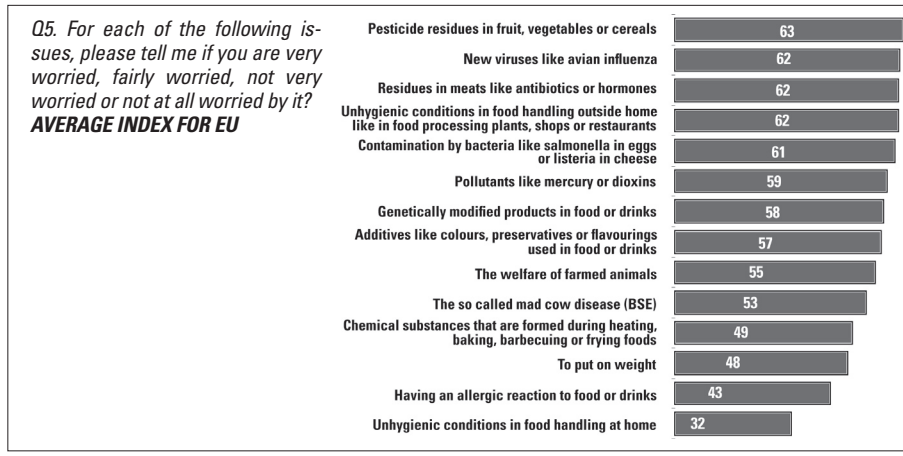


Fig. 3 – Risk perceptions - top concerns in Member States

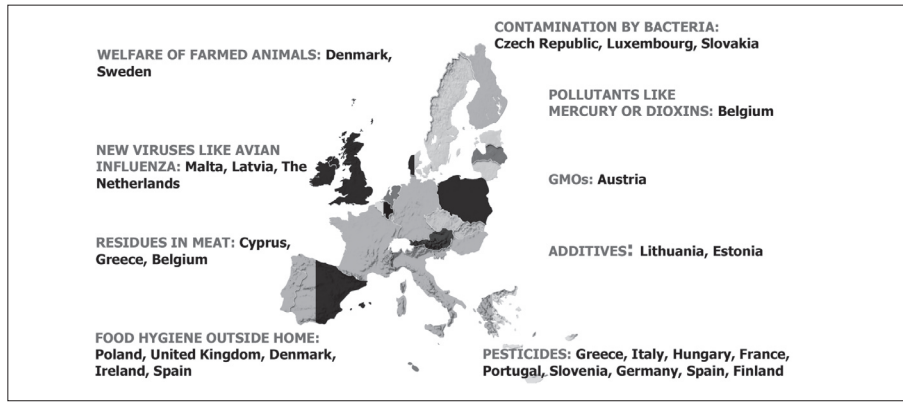
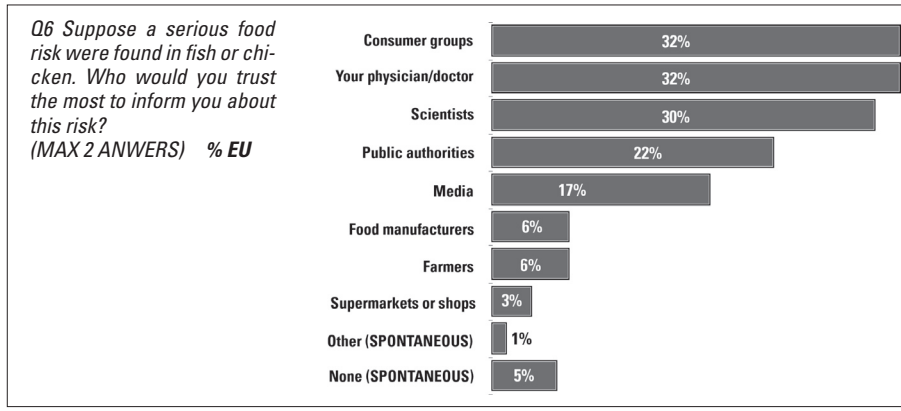


Fig. 4 – Preferred sources of information



Working with national authorities to improve risk communication

To enhance collaboration in risk communication between EFSA and Member States, EFSA's Advisory Forum Communications Working Group brings together Communication professionals from national food safety authorities, to allow exchange of information and greater co-ordination of communication activities between the national authorities and EFSA. The group also strives to develop best practices and share learning from past experiences through the evaluation of communication initiatives and campaigns carried out by the Authority and/or national agencies.

Taking expert advice on risk communication

EFSA has set up an expert Advisory Group on Risk Communications (AGRC), comprised of seven experts with a wide range of expertise in risk communication and reflecting Europe's wide cultural diversity. This multi-disciplinary group helps EFSA by providing advice, on an informal basis, to the Executive Director about the development and implementation of its risk communication strategies.

Who does EFSA communicate with?

Given the different levels of consumer awareness, interest in and attitudes towards communication on food, food safety, nutrition and health, it is neither possible nor desirable for EFSA to seek to address the resulting diverse and multiple information needs of consumers in Member States through a single and unique message disseminated across Europe. When crafting effective communications, one size does not fit all.

EFSA's communication strategy therefore focuses on "influencing the influencers," and on providing those organisations who engage regularly in consumer

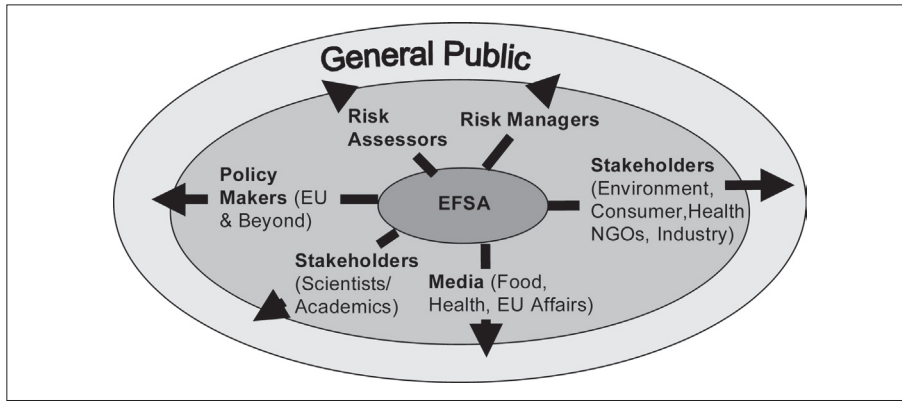
communications at national level as well as stakeholder and other groups in direct contact with consumers, with the information they require and with messages which can be further adapted and tailored to meet specific audience needs. Media are an important conduit and channel for reaching these groups as well as a broader audience with more targeted messages.

The primary targets or recipients of EFSA's scientific advice are in fact those who commission work from the Authority and/or have a particular involvement or interest in food and feed safety issues. These include: the European institutions who can task the Authority to carry out scientific work (i.e. the European Commission, European Parliament and Member States); national food safety authorities; stakeholders with a specific interest in the food chain (including industry, consumer organisations, environmental and other NGOs); stakeholders from the scientific and academic communities; and other audiences with a particular interest in food and food safety issues (e.g. health professional groups).

All of the opinions of EFSA's Scientific Panels and EFSA's own advice are ultimately available to the public, notably through their publication on the Authority's website. For more details, see the "EFSA website" section below.

Moreover, whilst EFSA's scientific advice is technical in nature and cannot cater to all the information needs of the public at large, it must nevertheless be understandable to non-scientists and within a broader public audience be meaningful and relevant to those with an interest in EFSA's work and notably to an informed layperson. How EFSA does this is explained in more detail in the section below: How does EFSA communicate?

Fig. 5. – Who does EFSA communicate with?



How does EFSA communicate?

Overall approach

EFSA tailors its communication approach to provide the appropriate level and depth of information whilst respecting its overall mandate of openness and tran-

sparency. EFSA has a forward planning calendar with respect to communications related to upcoming scientific issues to decide which opinions should be supported by more proactive communication. In determining how to communicate on different topics, EFSA takes into account considerations such as the significance of the risk assessment results, the nature of the risk, the potential public health impact and public perception and anticipated reactions.

EFSA communicates through a broad range of actions including publishing its scientific findings on the EFSA web site, mailing information to specific audiences, direct relations with the media, holding colloquia, workshops and/or conferences to exchange points of view and debate findings, and disseminating findings through press releases, media briefings and/or web streaming of conferences and meetings.

Public announcements

EFSA public announcements related to scientific opinions have so far concerned themes such as: semicarbazide and baby food; GMO risk assessments; contaminants in fish (methylmercury; safety of wild and farmed fish); labelling of allergenic foods; health effects of trans fatty acids; animal health and welfare (transport, stunning, laboratory animals); BSE (BSE risk in UK, Specified Risk Materials, BSE in goats); microbiological risks in infant formula; avian influenza, and aspartame.

Publication of Opinions and Summaries

All the opinions adopted by EFSA's Scientific Committee and Panels are published on the Authority's website. A summary outlining key findings is published along with the opinion and made available in the languages of the website. Whilst the Opinions are drafted in English, the recognised language of the international scientific community, summaries are provided also in French, German and Italian in order to facilitate their understanding and uptake, notably by the media.

Regular news updates sent by e mail

All third parties with a specific interest in EFSA's work can subscribe to the EFSA Highlights mailing in order to receive notification by email of new additions to the EFSA website, and notably to be alerted of the publication of scientific opinions.

Background notes, Fact Sheets and Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

When making an announcement on themes where further background information is particularly useful for non-technical readers, EFSA also publishes an additional explanatory note, a fact sheet or "FAQs" in order to provide essential factual background information. EFSA has published FAQs for instance on aspartame, GMOs, avian influenza, ITX and the safety of wild and farmed fish.

Press releases and press statements

These are drafted to announce the adoption of scientific opinions that are of broad public interest or which deal with complex and important issues. In 2005, EFSA published 46 press releases and statements, 30 of which were science-related. Whilst both are published on the EFSA website, press releases are in addition actively distributed to media. In determining whether press statements and/or press releases will be prepared, EFSA considers in particular the novelty of the scientific findings, the level of stakeholder and/or public interest, the presentation of a possible controversial point of view, and possible risk management implications.

Press conferences and media seminars

These are organised to present opinions for which there is a high level of stakeholder and public interest and/or for which there may be more immediate risk management implications. In addition to corporate events and announcements, EFSA press briefings to date have addressed scientific topics such as: semicarbazide and baby food; GMO risk assessments; trans fatty acids; aspartame; and BSE risk in goats.

EFSA Website

For a large percentage of EFSA's dedicated audience - European Union institutions, consumer, industry and other key stakeholders such as non-governmental organisations and the general public - the principle experience of EFSA is not through EFSA conferences or other types of face-to-face contact but through the EFSA website. The address is given at the end of this article.

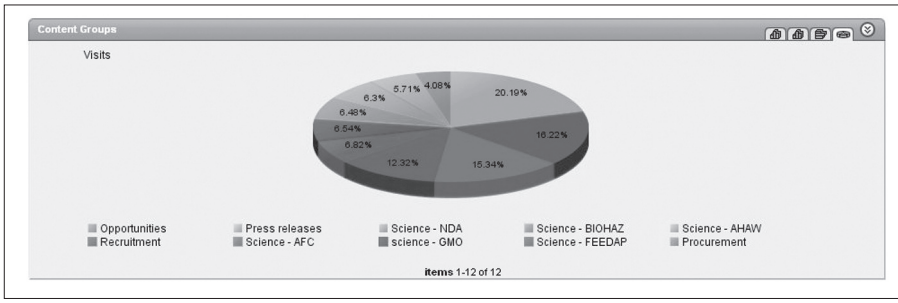
EFSAs website has become a Europe-wide reference service on food and feed safety issues. On average, it currently receives around 120,000 visits per month, while roughly 10,000 users receive regular e mail updates through free subscription to the EFSA Highlights service. Fig. 6 provides more detailed statistics on visits to the EFSA website in the first quarter of 2006.

A web survey was carried out in January 2006 to better identify user needs and help guide future developments. Based on results from this survey the information architecture of the site will be developed to further improve the presentation and user friendliness.

New thematic sections have recently been integrated into the site focusing on themes of widespread interest to consumers. The "Focus on the issues" and "Frequently Asked Questions" sections together cover topics including GMOs, aspartame, ITX, avian influenza, safety of wild and farmed fish and semicarbazide.

Moreover, the latest web technology has been used to broadcast EFSA events via web casting, allowing users to view the proceedings live or recorded through a video on demand service. Broadcast events so far have included key meetings such as sittings of the Management Board and a recent press conference announcing the adoption of a scientific opinion concerning aspartame.

Fig. 6 – Website statistics for the first quarter of 2006



Publications

Publications play an important role in making the Authority's work known to key target audiences. EFSA publications fall into two categories: corporate and scientific. EFSA's corporate publications include the bimonthly newsletter (EFSANews), the Annual Report and Summary; a corporate brochure presenting the Authority, its remit, organisation and work; and fact sheets on key themes related to EFSA and its development. Meanwhile, a growing number of scientific publications are being developed including guidance documents on risk assessment and the publication series for EFSA's Scientific Colloquia. Current circulation of EFSA publications is over 10,000, primarily through subscription and electronic distribution via the Authority's website. All of EFSA's currently available publications can be consulted on http://www.efsa.europa.eu/press_room/publications/catindex_en.html.

Media relations

Media constitute an important source of information for consumers in Europe regarding food and food safety issues. EFSA's Communications department is the main point of contact for the media with EFSA and its scientific experts. The EFSA press office is composed of a team of multi-lingual communication professionals able to manage media relations in 6 of the EU's official languages (Dutch, French, English, German, Italian and Spanish). The inclusion of trained scientists in the team facilitates understanding of scientific concepts required for drafting and communication of risk assessment methodology and findings.

In addition to the preparation of press materials and the organisation of press briefings, the EFSA press office handles media queries from general and specialised press on a daily basis and organises media briefings and interviews to convey EFSA positions on a wide range of corporate and scientific issues. EFSA's press office has established a comprehensive database of around 1000 national, European and international media contacts with an interest in EFSA's activities and actively sends out its press releases to these journalists on a regular basis.

Results of EFSA Risk Communication: case studies

ITX in baby milk

ITX (Isopropylthioxanthone) is a substance used in inks applied to packaging materials, including foods packed in cartons, some of which contain food for babies and infants.

Traces of an unknown substance coming from packaging ink, which was later identified as ITX, were found in milk during a routine control test in an Italian laboratory during 2005. Italian police announced in November 2005 the seizure of 30 million litres of liquid baby milk from supermarkets and from depots. Shortly afterwards, a major manufacturer of infant formula recalled its liquid baby milk from the supermarkets in Italy and other European countries.

The European Commission requested EFSA to provide scientific advice with respect to possible health risks associated with this substance. Whilst this concern related to food controls, EFSA was called upon to provide scientific advice in order to assist public authorities with this risk management issue. In view of the level of public concern, EFSA's AFC Panel gave the issue high priority and adopted its opinion on 7 December 2005.

Media coverage in Italy was very high and concerns over safety were understandably widespread. A case like this presents difficult circumstances for communication since the "food scare" was widely reported on and action was taken by authorities responsible for risk management before the EFSA assessment could be produced. It therefore demanded careful handling in terms of communication to ensure that accurate, factual information was provided while the final opinion was awaited.

EFSA issued a press statement in November 2005 to inform the media and the public of the fact that EFSA had been requested to carry out a safety assessment. Given the high level of public concern, this included preliminary advice that the presence of ITX was not likely to present a health risk at the levels reported. EFSA stated clearly that this was based on very limited data and that a full scientific opinion would follow. Subsequently, EFSA maintained the flow of public information by issuing press statements to clarify that it was currently carrying out its risk assessment and would issue its final Opinion shortly.

On 7 December EFSA's Scientific Panel on food additives, flavourings, processing aids and materials in contact with food (AFC Panel) adopted its final Opinion and EFSA issued a press release stating that the presence of ITX in foods, whilst undesirable, does not give cause for health concern at the levels reported. The Panel concluded that the findings from animal studies did not indicate a genotoxic potential for ITX. It paid special attention to the exposure of infants and young children, since the potential dietary exposure of infants and young children was potentially higher than that of adults. Importantly, the Panel stated that if contamination of foods with ITX were to continue, it would wish to make recommendations about further studies that may be needed to further evaluate the risk posed by this substance.

The ITX case highlighted the challenges inherent in risk communication and notably the interpretation of messages by other parties. As some groups implied in their communications that EFSA had endorsed the safety of ITX, the Authority had to reiterate that it had provided an evaluation of safety based on current levels found in food at the time and did not have sufficient data or information to carry out a full risk assessment on ITX. Moreover, this case reaffirmed the need for pro-active and direct communications to consumers from national food safety authorities in order to provide up-to-date, practical advice on food safety issues tailored to the specific situation and concerns at national level.

In addition to the media activities, EFSA published FAQs on the EFSA website providing answers to some of the most commonly asked questions. This factual information served to clarify several doubts and uncertainties surrounding ITX for consumers and was a useful source of information for the media, stakeholders and the public.

Ultimately, media reporting on EFSA's Opinion on ITX was largely balanced and factual, despite the high level of concern the case provoked and the alarming headlines carried in some publications before EFSA adopted its scientific opinion. The key message - that current levels of intake evaluated by the Panel at the time were not a serious cause for health concerns - was understood by media and reached consumers.

Aspartame

Another high profile risk assessment recently carried out by EFSA concerned the evaluation of a long-term study on the carcinogenicity of aspartame, an intense sweetener, which was carried out by the European Ramazzini Foundation in Bologna. This is a good example of how EFSA has strived to provide accurate, factual and timely information to the media and public concerning an issue of high public interest, and how balanced and factual information has successfully reached consumers.

In July 2005, the European Ramazzini Foundation presented new findings of a long-term study on aspartame conducted in rats. The scientists from the European Ramazzini Foundation concluded that the results indicated that aspartame can cause cancer and that the current guidelines on the use and consumption of the sweetener should be re-evaluated.

Aspartame has been authorized for use in foods and as a table-top sweetener for more than 20 years in many countries. Extensive investigations have been carried out on aspartame and its breakdown products and a number of safety evaluations have been conducted in the past. The Scientific Committee on Food - the European-level predecessor to EFSA - carried out a review of existing studies on aspartame in 2002 and reconfirmed that aspartame is safe for human consumption. Nonetheless, the product's safety has been controversial since it was introduced onto the market, and the conclusions of the European Ramazzini Foundation, if found to disprove the results of previous safety evaluations, were alarming.

EFSA immediately undertook the evaluation of the new findings and issued a press release in July announcing that the new results had been published, that it had already held discussions with the European Ramazzini Foundation and that it would examine their results as a matter of high priority. At the same time, this press release made clear that the full data set was not available and that EFSA did not consider it appropriate to suggest any change in consumers' diets relative to aspartame on the basis of the information it currently had.

EFSA reiterated this message in November 2005 in a further press release stating that "based on current evidence on the safety of aspartame, EFSA does not recommend that consumers who wish to choose foods containing aspartame make any changes to their dietary habits". The same press release also explained that EFSA had requested that the European Ramazzini Foundation provide all study details necessary for the assessment. In circumstances such as these, where an EFSA Opinion is eagerly awaited by stakeholders and the general public, it is important for EFSA to encourage access to the data and information required for its scientific evaluation and to explain the reasons why time is needed to finalise its Opinions, particularly when any delays occur that are not within EFSA's direct sphere of control. On 19 December EFSA issued an update announcing that it had received additional data from the European Ramazzini Foundation and could proceed with its evaluation.

EFSA adopted its final Opinion on 5 May 2006. In its opinion, the Panel concluded, on the basis of all the evidence currently available, that there is no need to further review the safety of aspartame nor to revise the previously established Acceptable Daily Intake (ADI) for aspartame (40 mg/kg body weight). The Panel also noted that intakes of aspartame in Europe, with levels up to 10 mg/kg body weight per day, are well below the ADI. EFSA also made clear that if any new information bacame available in the future, EFSA would review it as a matter of priority.

Since this was an issue of great public interest in the EU and beyond, EFSA held a press conference to announce the adoption of its scientific Opinion, and invited the President of the European Ramazzini Foundation to participate, in order to offer both organisations a platform and to give journalists an opportunity to ask questions to. The press conference was broadcast via EFSA's website and watched (live or on a recording) by around 1000 viewers.

EFSA published Frequently Asked Questions on aspartame on its website, to guide a non-specialised audience through the key issues in relation to aspartame and to clarify points that may otherwise remain unclear through factual, impartial information.

Overall, reporting on the adoption of the final aspartame opinion was largely factual and balanced. The central message with respect to the safety of aspartame was conveyed to consumers. Headlines included "l'aspartame supera l'esame di sicurezza" (Corriere della Sera), "L'aspartame est sans danger selon EFSA" (Le Monde), "Sweetener 'is not a cancer risk'"(The Times).

BSE in goats

In late October 2004, French authorities and the European Commission informed the European public of a suspected case of Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) identified in a goat in France. The European Commission immediately forwarded the data received from French authorities to the Community Reference Laboratory (CRL) so that experts could evaluate whether these new findings indicated the presence of BSE in a goat. The European Commission also requested that in light of these new events EFSA provide advice on the safety of milk and meat in relation to TSE (Transmissible Spongiform Encephalopathy) in goats and sheep.

Recognising the need to give immediate advice to consumers in light of this suspected case of BSE in a goat, EFSA issued preliminary advice on the health risks of goat milk and derived products on the basis of existing information. In a press release regarding a statement of the BSE/TSE Working Group of EFSA's BIOHAZ (Biological Hazards)Panel, EFSA stated that "goat milk and goat milk products sourced from healthy animals, and irrespective of their geographical origin, are unlikely to present any risk of TSE contamination.." At the same time, EFSA made clear that more data were required to assess possible risks associated with goat meat and to undertake a comprehensive quantitative risk assessment of possible risks associated with the consumption of goat meat and milk.

In January 2005 the case of BSE in a goat was confirmed. The Commission extended surveillance of the goat population in the EU with respect to TSEs including discriminatory testing to differentiate between BSE and other TSE s in sheep and goats. EFSA provided an update on its plans to assess the safety of goat meat and goat meat products with respect to BSE/TSE in a press release and announced that important information gaps remained to be filled in order to be able to deliver a quantitative risk assessment.

When the case of BSE was confirmed in January 2005 it received significant media coverage in Europe and worldwide. The main message in the media was that BSE had apparently spread to goats, with headlines such as "Goat had 'Mad Cow Disease'" (The Irish Times), "Mucca pazza: EFSA, su capra entro luglio nuovi aggiornamenti" (ANSA), "Confirman primer contagio de mal de 'vacas locas' a una cabra" (EFE).

Once the risk assessment was completed by the BIOHAZ Panel in June, EFSA published a press release and organized a press briefing on 28 June 2005 on its opinion, providing an update on the assessment of the safety of goat meat and goat meat products with regard to BSE. Whislt highlighting that important information gaps remained, EFSA stated that "the likely prevalence of BSE in the wider EU goat population is very low" and that "the current risk in terms of BSE, related to the consumption of goat meat and their products is considered at this time to be small."

Most media reports on the EFSA A opinion in June 2005 covered these key messages and was largely balanced and factual. Headlines included: "Les experts européens rassurants sur les risques de chèvre folle" (AFP) and "EFSA ve poco riesgo EEB en consumo carne cabra de menos de 4 años"(El Mundo).

A transparent and proactive communication approach reassured the public that the situation was under control and managed in the public interest. Another important factor was that consistent and co-ordinated messages were issued by the key actors involved - EFSA, the European Commission, the Community Reference Laboratory (responsible for scientific research into the case of suspected BSE) and the French authorities.

Communications on the issue of BSE risk in goats did not trigger panic as the risk was perceived as being low and there were measures in place to manage that risk (i.e. increased surveillance and monitoring). In order to achieve this, it had been important for all actors involved to keep the public informed at each stage and to outline areas of uncertainty and knowledge gaps so that stakeholders, the media and the public could understand the scale of the risk and what public authorities were doing about it. In collaboration with the European Commission and national authorities, EFSA thus largely achieved the balance of communicating risk without causing unnecessary or disproportionate alarm. EFSA was also successful in conveying a message about the need to continue to monitor and research this issue.

Looking ahead

Although EFSA is still a recent organisation, it has already proved itself to be an organisation committed to providing independent scientific advice and communicating findings in an open, transparent and proactive manner.. With the arrival on 3rd July 2006 of EFSA's new Executive Director, Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle, EFSA has received new impetus and can look forward to strengthening its communication activities even further, as this is one of her stated priorities flowing from the most recent recommendations of EFSA's Management Board.

To find out more about EFSA, visit EFSA's website at: http://www.efsa.europa.eu/index_it.html.

You can also consult EFSA's Communications Strategy document at: http://www.efsa.europa.eu/mboard/mb_meetings/1314/mb_communication-strategy_24meet_en1.pdf