

Europe united for safer food

With 370 million consumers to protect and several burning issues to deal with, the new European Food Safety Authority certainly has a full agenda. *Food Technology International* got the low-down from its executive director, Geoffrey Podger.

With executive director Geoffrey Podger in the driving seat and the scientific committee and panels set up, the new European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) is on the way to full operational status. The authority's primary responsibility is to provide independent scientific advice on all matters with a direct or indirect impact on food safety.

'We will be looking at issues across the whole food safety patch,' says Podger. 'Nothing would be more unwise than to say: "Today, we are going to focus on food contamination" — and then discover that the problem is BSE.'

EFSA has taken over the risk assessment task from the European Commission, which will still be responsible for actual risk management. But although the new authority's main 'customer' is the European Commission, it will also deal with questions from the European Parliament and the EU member states. In the case of, for example, the acrylamide issue, EFSA is helping to coordinate the European acrylamide research programme.

'At the moment, we are mainly working with the EU member states, where various research initiatives are under way,' says Podger. 'And together with the member states, we shall look at the consequences of the risk assessment of acrylamide.'

EFSA will share its findings and listen to the views of others — such as national food safety bodies, and various experts and decision-makers — through a vast network. Efficient networking with national scientific organisations will, for example, be an essential mechanism for exchanging information on potential risks and for pooling knowledge. It will also encourage broad understanding and acceptance of EFSA's scientific advice in Europe.

'One of the current criticisms is that individual authorities tend to put forward individual opinions that are not coordinated across Europe,' says Podger. 'We are aiming at increased coordination. National bodies can provide input into EFSA's work and, when necessary, join in publicising our conclusions to the public.'

EFSA can also initiate risk assessments on its own behalf, and working out mechanisms for doing that is equally important. A key task for EFSA, however, will be to communicate directly with the public on its areas of responsibility. It will make public the outcome of its risk assessments on its website or, in the case of really important discoveries, take a more proactive media line. If



Podger claims that BSE still needs to be subject to thorough scientific analysis. Photo courtesy of USDA Photo.

a certain discovery leads to issues of risk management, the European Commission will have to deal with them.

Burning issues

Although certain compromises regarding GM food have been reached, the divide between Europe and the USA is still a fact. And this issue will, most likely, be a tough nut to crack for EFSA. But what part will EFSA actually play on the GM arena?

'We will handle the scientific side, running the approvals procedure for GM foods,' says Podger. 'Foods that get through this procedure should be as safe as their conventional equivalents. As regards the dispute with the USA, that is mainly a dispute over choice, labelling and so on, and is, therefore, a matter for the European Commission.'

Another topic that is still a hot potato is, obviously, BSE. Encouraging projections from the UK indicate that the number of deaths caused by BSE is much smaller than first feared. So, is this the final chapter of BSE?

'From EFSA's point of view, the key issue is that relaxation of the controls needs to be very thoroughly looked at; a proper scientific analysis is necessary,' says Podger. 'We need to be careful not to declare that BSE is over, because we are not in that situation yet.'

Meat is also the main focus of interest in discussions about antimicrobial additives, which are increasingly used in the food industry. Preventing the growth of hazardous pathogens such as *Listeria* and *Salmonella*, antimicrobial additives are not only applied directly to food, but also to materials that come in contact with food — such as conveyor belts or the lining of bulk bags. How does Podger feel about this trend?

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Robert Coleman, director-general for the directorate general for Health and Consumer protection, the European Commission

'I am strongly in favour of taking all reasonable measures to reduce pathogens,' he says, 'but whether using antimicrobial additives is the best way of doing it is an open question.'

One important microbiological issue, according to Podger, is to find ways to effectively address the pathogen problem – without generating further difficulties. He continues: 'In fact, proper production methods for food, proper storage and proper cooking would deal with most of the pathogen problems. If foodstuffs were produced in a better way, they would have a lower pathogen count from the beginning.'

Body with potential

'EFSA is going to have a major impact on the food safety scene,' claims Podger. 'For the first time, the European Commission has lost its responsibility for producing scientific advice. The divide between these bodies that people have wanted to see is now a real one. However, we will have to expand rapidly to be able to provide the service that people actually want from us.'

In June 2003, EFSA's staff only amounted to around 35. The aim is to get this figure up to 200–300, or at least to 100 by the end of 2003. If EFSA's resources turn out to be insufficient to deal with the number of requests, it will have to prioritise between topics. The first priority will, naturally, be public health, and the second to try to meet its legal demands as far as possible.

In October, EFSA will host an event for its stakeholders in Ostend, Belgium. There, one important topic will be how the risk assessment process can be opened up. 'People often feel that questions they submit enter a black hole, and an answer emerges over which they have had no influence at all,' says Podger. 'EFSA's scientific panels

are already discussing ideas such as having hearings during risk assessment and possibly publishing opinions in draft.

The authority is also interested in making its stakeholders in different countries help out with risk communication. This would help the authority pinpoint the burning issues that it should be looking at – issues that are a matter of concern to the general public, but that no other authority deals with.

Solid scientific base

Podger, as EFSA's executive director, is responsible for the day-to-day management of the authority and is answerable to the management board. He will be assisted by an advisory forum composed of representatives from the competent bodies in the EU member states, on the basis of one representative per member state.

A scientific committee and eight scientific panels – whose members are not employees of EFSA – will be responsible for the scientific opinions of EFSA. The committee is responsible for the general coordination necessary to ensure the consistency in the scientific opinions of the different panels. It is composed of the chairpersons of the scientific panels and six experts who do not belong to any panel. The panels are, in turn, composed of

EFSA's scientific panels are focused on the following topics:

- ❖ Food additives, flavourings, processing aids and materials in contact with food
- ❖ Additives and products or substances used in animal feed
- ❖ Plant health, plant protection products and their residues
- ❖ GMOs
- ❖ Dietetic products, nutrition and allergies
- ❖ Biological hazards (including TSE/BSE issues)
- ❖ Contaminants in the food chain
- ❖ Animal health and welfare

independent scientific experts selected by the management board.

Temporarily in Brussels, EFSA's future location is still an open question. This is a political decision that, according to Podger, will probably be taken in the context of a wider package agreement between the EU member states. ❖

Geoffrey Podger took up his appointment with EFSA at the beginning of February 2003, having been selected by the management board from about 100 applicants.

Previously, Podger was the chief executive of the UK Food Standards Agency.

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