

# WORKING TOGETHER FOR SAFER FOOD

Geoffrey Podger, executive director of the European Food Safety Authority, brings *Food Processing Intelligence* up to date on the authority's activities since his appointment two years ago.

**Food Processing Intelligence** last spoke to Geoffrey Podger in 2003, shortly after he had been appointed executive director of the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA). After two years, EFSA has embarked on an ambitious programme to increase stakeholder involvement in its work, and is in the midst of a move to Parma, Italy. Now seems like a good time to catch up.

**Food Processing Intelligence:** It's getting on for two years since you were appointed to the EFSA and we last interviewed you. At that time the authority employed only 35 people. How has the authority grown and increased its capacity since then?

**Geoffrey Podger:** In 2005, EFSA's core staff levels are expected to double from 102 at the end of 2004 to reach an expected target of 194. It will be essential for the authority to continue to recruit senior scientists with a high level of scientific expertise to effectively fulfil its mandate in the area of risk assessment.

**FPI:** In your last interview with us, you stressed the importance of increasing co-ordination within Europe. Can you give some examples of how EFSA has encouraged a coordinated approach?

**GP:** The Advisory Forum is EFSA's consultative body and has been in existence since March 2003, holding its meetings across Europe. It has successfully built close working relationships between EFSA and the national food agencies in the 25 member states as it brings together the heads or scientific directors of the national agencies meeting under the chairmanship of EFSA's executive director.

Its role is to advise and build collaboration and cooperation between the national authorities, particularly in relation to risk assessment and communication.

To this end, the Advisory Forum exchanges scientific data, reports and other information on a regular basis at (or increasingly in between) its meetings. One of the key tasks of the forum is to look at joint working activities and identify areas where there are overlaps of scientific work to avoid unnecessary duplication of effort.

The Advisory Forum has also been busy looking at how collaboration and co-operation would work if a food safety crisis were to arise. Recently the forum held a crisis scenario exercise in which the member states, EFSA and representatives from the European Commission went through their roles as a fictitious safety crisis unfolded.

In November 2004, the Advisory Forum organised its first public event in Berlin, to make its work known to a broader audience. The successful event brought together members of the Advisory Forum, representatives of European national authorities and expert scientists specialised in risk assessment. Over 350 people participated.

As part of its overall mission, the Advisory Forum has created two working groups reporting to it: one on communication and one on IT. The IT working group, together with the national agencies, is developing the IT infrastructure and platforms for the dissemination of scientific and other information. Such systems are important in periods of normal activity and will be critical in a crisis.

The communications working group links the communications departments in the national food agencies. Its objective is to build a more collaborative and informed approach to communicating risks in the food chain in order to promote the coherence of food safety messages. EFSA's overall approach ensures that each national authority presents information for their own populations based on national circumstances and cultural sensitivities.

**FPI:** Another area that you were concentrating on was increasing public and stakeholder access and input to the advisory process. How has this increased transparency developed?

**GP:** It is of primary importance to EFSA to pursue an ongoing dialogue with its stakeholders in an open manner, especially with stakeholder organisations with a legitimate interest in the area of food and feed safety. EFSA is developing a stakeholder policy with the overall aim of engaging interested parties from civil society, mainly the academic community; consumer, environmental and other NGOs; and industry groups representing all economic operators, including farmers, manufacturers and retailers. EFSA proposes to develop its relationship with stakeholders in order not only to develop a better understanding between them and EFSA but also to help promote better understanding of each other. This policy is complementary to EFSA's relations with its institutional stakeholders, such as the European Commission, the European Parliament and member states, to whom EFSA has a legal obligation.

The board agreed to implement several initiatives to improve dialogue between EFSA and its stakeholders. The main points concerned the openness and transparency of board meetings, opening up the risk assessment process, keeping in touch with stakeholders and the involvement of stakeholders in risk communication.

We have encouraged public attendance at management board meetings, which have been held with web streaming. The agendas, documents and minutes of the management board and Advisory Forum are now published, as well as the agendas and minutes of the Scientific Committee and panel meetings.

The register of scientific questions has been made more transparent, and allows for the tracking of questions addressed to EFSA. During 2004, public consultations on important issues have been held, such as on feed additives. We have also carried out web consultations and followed up with a stakeholder hearing on the new guidelines for the assessment of GMOs.

Scientific colloquia have been organised. The First Scientific Colloquium in June 2004 addressed methodologies and principles for setting tolerable intake levels for dioxins, furans and dioxin-like PCBs; the second colloquium, held in December, debated the qualified presumption of safety (QPS) concerning micro-organisms utilised in food and feed production.

EFSA has increased its communication activities, bringing closer and more focused press/media relations, an increase of EFSA's publications and a more user-friendly website. We've also instituted an email system to distribute important news to stakeholders and to inform the public at large of new content on EFSA's website. EFSA also has a regular presence at international conferences.

The purpose of the EFSA's second stakeholder *colloque* was to continue the dialogue with stakeholders. Participants discussed issues such as how society perceives risk, the participation of stakeholders in the risk assessment process and the way forward for EFSA from the stakeholders' point of view.

A number of recommendations for the further engagement of stakeholders in the work of EFSA were proposed to the management board. Highlights included the establishment of a stakeholder forum consultative committee composed of stakeholder organisations with a legitimate interest in the area of food and feed safety and in the areas of work of EFSA.

We will continue our bilateral contacts with stakeholders within our mission and in particular areas of food and feed safety which have been shown to be very useful. We will also continue our public consultations on specific matters, as well as scientific colloquia on relevant scientific issues. EFSA will develop and publish the principles it utilises in guiding the choice of consultations to be held so that these are transparent to all.

In the context of EFSA's review in 2005, stakeholders will be included in the process through the independent external evaluation taking into account the views of stakeholders.

**FPI:** Over the next year, EFSA will be moving from its temporary home in Brussels to Parma. Could you tell us a little more about this move?

**GP:** Since January 2005, I have been officially based in Parma, the official seat of the authority. By the end of January, 22 EFSA staff will already be based in Parma. The remainder of EFSA staff currently based in Brussels will relocate progressively over the coming months to ensure the continuity of its scientific activities. ■

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