

APPROVED: 5 February 2016

Advisory Forum Review

European Food Safety Authority

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Key words: EFSA, Advisory Forum, Member States, Risk Assessment, Scientific Cooperation.

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Suggested citation: EFSA (European Food Safety Authority), 2016. Advisory Forum Review. EFSA supporting publication 2016. 14 pp.

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Background

The Advisory Forum (AF) was established by EFSA in 2002, legally based on EFSA's Founding Regulation (EC) No 178/2002 (Art.27). The main objectives of the Forum are to advise EFSA's Executive Director (ED) on EFSA's work and to exchange information, ensure cooperation and avoidance of duplication of work and diverging opinions. The Forum consists of representatives of each Member State (MS), Norway, Iceland and observers from Switzerland, Pre-Accession countries and the European Commission (EC). In accordance with the requirements in the Founding Regulation, the Forum is chaired by EFSA's ED.

In 2012 an external review of EFSA was conducted by Ernst & Young¹ and in relation to the AF, summary findings concluded that "the use of AF advice and assistance can be improved to be more efficient". An internal review of the operation of the AF was carried out in 2014 which was followed by a survey among the AF Members and break-out discussion sessions at the 54th and 56th AF Plenary Meetings in December 2014 and June 2015 respectively.

The review of the operation of the AF was undertaken to identify ways in which the recommendations of the 2012 external review could be addressed as well as ensuring that the Forum operated in a way that met the requirements of the Founding Regulation and the Executive Director's need for a platform to enable scientific cooperation at a "new level" of practical partnership between MS and EFSA.

The Executive Director has identified the drivers for EFSA in the coming years as increasing complexity, greater transparency, increased resources sharing, innovation, openness and cooperation. Scientific cooperation is an integral part of EFSA's Strategy 2020, and the Strategy is expected to provide for a longer time-perspective and strategic home for scientific cooperation. The Strategy proposes that MS and EFSA will agree and implement a common EU Risk Assessment Agenda (EURAA), one that will improve the use of Europe-wide capacities, the efficient spending of limited resources and lead to more coherent communications. The common agenda will also play an important role in preventing doubling of work and help influence MS priorities and research programmes.

Following the completion of this review of the operation of the Advisory Forum it is expected that the Management Board Decision concerning the operation of the Advisory Forum² (2008) will be updated to reflect any necessary changes and to ensure that there is a strong basis for the partnership model being developed.

¹ <http://www.efsa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/assets/efsafinalreport.pdf>

² <http://www.efsa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/assets/afoperation.pdf>

Vision for Advisory Forum

The vision for the AF is for it to be the Steering Committee for the EURAA, agreeing on joint projects, training opportunities, information, data and expertise sharing, so as to be a constructive network among MS and EFSA for advice, help, pooling of knowledge, avoidance of double-work, identification of emerging issues and cooperation in case of scientific divergence, and a central platform for promoting European networking of competent organisations and coherent communication.

The intensity of cooperation will increase by working together on joint projects and by strengthening the recognition at national level of AF members as representatives of their country. This should enable members of the Forum to speak on behalf of their country and commit resources, where needed, to priorities agreed in the EURAA. This will allow for real partnership, so that MS and EFSA can tackle common food safety issues, and decide together who is doing what, with MS being able to lead certain activities.

Adoption of the EURAA will provide a new modus operandi for the AF to agree common priorities for cooperation with other MS. Identified priorities will be followed up by joint projects potentially supported by grants from EFSA or resources identified through other (inter-)national funding schemes. AF members will be asked to indicate to which priority topics they dedicate own expertise and/or find additional (inter-)national resources.

Methodology of Review

An internal review was carried out on the operation of the AF during 2014. As part of the recommendations of that review, in October of that year a questionnaire was distributed to all members. In the questionnaire AF Members were asked their perception of the Forum, their opinion on the agenda, of the discussions and decisions of the plenary meetings, and their interaction with EFSA and national institutions.

At the 54th AF Meeting a breakout group session with external facilitation was held for members of the Forum to undertake a critical self-evaluation of the way the AF functions. Two areas of AF activities were considered: The first related to the results of the Members' survey on operational issues of the AF, the second dealt with Members' perceptions of the efficacy of the AF's operation in light of the Founding Regulation.

For the first, Members split into small discussion groups to elaborate pre-assigned discussion topics centred around the Forum's objectives, the ideal format of and barriers of engagement in the meetings, interaction with other groups and between AF Members and the sharing of information. The latter referred to eight tasks of the AF as laid down in EFSA's Founding Regulation, which were discussed each by a break-out group:

- Provide advice to EFSA's ED in the performance of his duties (including the work programme and prioritisations of requests for scientific opinions)
- Avoid the duplication of scientific studies or research projects/ programmes
- Ensure close cooperation between national competent bodies and EFSA
- Promote European networking of organisations (Art.36 organisations)
- Ensure close cooperation where EFSA or MS identify an emerging risk
- Cooperate in situations where a scientific divergence is identified
- Share and exchange information
- Pool knowledge

Telephone interviews with 12 volunteering AF Members (Cyprus, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Lithuania, Netherlands, Poland, Slovak Republic, Spain, Sweden, UK) were undertaken in April and May 2015 by the external facilitator to gain further insight into the role the members play in the Forum and at national level. The interviews concentrated on a) role of AF Members in the Forum, b) function of an AF Member in representing his/her country and c) AF Members' needs and expectations as active participants in the Forum.

The results were presented on the 56th AF Plenary Meeting held in June 2015.

The final report of the AF Members' Consultation process between March and June 2015 was issued in August 2015.

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I. Outcomes

A. Meeting Organisation and Sharing Information

AF Members ranked the most important objectives of the AF to be “ensuring close cooperation between national competent bodies and EFSA” and “sharing and exchanging information”, particularly to share information on new and on-going risk assessment (RA) was named important.

With regard to the latter, AF Members agreed that the current tool (excel table) for sharing information about forthcoming RA activities and workplans works well. Oral presentations at the AF meetings, with documentary support were seen as useful, although it was recommended to clarify criteria for selecting RA topics for consideration based on general interest and cross border relevance. Suggestions for improving information sharing about RA opinions included using Focal Points (FPs) and sharing published information that contain English language summaries through a suitable exchange tool as has been the case with the existing Information Exchange Platform (IEP).

AF members commented that less agenda items and more discussion was needed at meetings. The majority of respondents to the questionnaire said that more discussion on the prioritization of EFSA mandates should take place at meetings with more discussions to take place on items raised by MS. Respondents commented that better defined objectives of papers were needed and clarity of advice sought from members. They suggested that EFSA should harvest MS` priorities for “next AF meeting” agenda and that a greater focus in AF agendas should be on strategic issues.

Concern was raised about the amount of meeting documentation. It was suggested that the limited time members have to read it thoroughly in advance of meetings mitigates against some members participating to their fullest extent in plenary discussion. Specific recommendations to encourage greater participation included a) clarifying and communicating the role of the AF Members b) clarifying EFSA`s expectations of AF Members c) providing an induction programme for new AF Members d) assigning mentors to new AF Members and e) working AF Members to identify the range, contact points and working relationships with national network bodies.

AF members suggested to create a research agenda of strategic priorities, setting out the direction of travel and to thoroughly re-appraise ways to influence Community research agenda.

Recommendations

1. EFSA should develop Agenda for AF meetings with active involvement from the members at the earliest opportunity possible. Strategic Discussions should be planned well in advance through a yearly programme based on proposals from members.
2. An overview of the purpose and operation of the AF should be prepared for new members as part of an induction process.
3. As documents become available for meetings they should be shared as far in advance with members and not only the required 10 days prior to the relevant meeting, with a clear indication of the expectation from members. Items for discussion should be clearly indicated on the meeting Agenda.
4. The table on forthcoming RA should continue to be used as a means of exchange on RA activities being undertaken by MS.

5. The IEP has been used as a means of sharing published information on RA from the MS. The use of a tool with such functionality should continue, but a new tool with the ability to cater for existing and future needs should be identified and implemented in the short term.
6. The annual consultation on RA priorities for contributing proposals to DG Research and Innovation and DG Agriculture for the Horizon 2020 Framework Programme should continue with further consideration on how to influence national and European research programmes supported through the development of the EURAA.

B. Engagement

To promote the reality of AF members being active advisors all the time, it was suggested that EFSA raise the profile of the AF in its other networks and amongst MS, as well as AF Members themselves using their own national networks to increase AF visibility. To facilitate inter-meeting interactions AF members understood that it is necessary to consider ways to interact during ad hoc requests, emergency situations, preparing for AF meetings, follow-up from AF meetings and collaborating in RA. It was recommended that effective interaction to ad hoc requests could be facilitated by including such requests in AF agendas, and using email as a tool for speedy communication. Emergency situations needed AF Members to access the EC's RASFF, EMRISK contact points, using telephone, email and teleconference tools. In preparing for AF meetings it was proposed that AF members work in advance of the meeting together with EFSA in preparing the agenda. The suggestion for improving interactions after AF meetings is to issue a summary of the topics from previous meetings using e-tools such as EFSA's Document Management System (DMS) or other collaborative platforms. Members proposed that greater collaboration in RA could be achieved through improving contact after AF or FP meetings where issues of interest were raised or identified (such as the sharing of information on forthcoming RA activities) using email, working groups, teleconference and physical meetings.

Interaction between AF and MS and EFSA itself were considered as needing improvement. At MS level it was recommended to strengthen responsibility of AF Members in their interactions with national network members. Between EFSA and the AF it was recommended that national networks should identify issues for discussion at AF meetings, submitting information to AF Members for "pre-filtering" and prioritising for AF meetings. It was suggested that better distribution of minutes, annual reports and physical presentations from networks could be ways of improving the interaction between AF and the networks themselves.

AF Members expressed their wish to have more interaction with the scientific networks of EFSA and the Scientific Committee, also by holding joint meetings with other committees.

Members welcomed the visits of the ED and saw these as a good means of building partnership between EFSA and the MS through joint projects. The development of the EURAA was supported by members who were looking forward to the outcome of the Delphi Study to identify the priorities for collaboration, providing a new modus operandi for agree on common priorities for joint projects. This will allow for real partnership, so that MS and EFSA can tackle common food safety issues, and decide together who is doing what, with MS having expertise being able to lead certain activities.

In relation to commitment to the stated objectives of EFSA and the Forum, a question was raised as to whether AF members and the ED should make a declaration of commitment to act independently in the public interest, in a similar way that Members of the Management Board (MB) operate in signing a code of conduct. While such a declaration of intent had

been made in the past, there was scope for updating and reiterating this independence and consumer orientation.

Recommendations:

1. Members should continue to work in collaboration with FPs to ensure regular exchanges between national representatives of EFSA's scientific networks and AF members.
2. Members of the Forum should be active in proposing items for discussion through consultation with national networks.
3. Representatives of Scientific Panels and Networks (on a rotation basis of one per meeting) should continue to attend AF meetings to provide information on and discuss work plans as well as discuss current issues of relevance to the specific domain.
4. Periodic joint meetings (AF, MB, FPs and AF Communications Working Group (AFCWG)) should be considered for future AF meetings. The current annual meeting with the Chair and Vice Chair of the MB should continue.
5. The 'declaration of intent' signed at the 18th AF meeting in September 2006 should be reaffirmed and expanded to include a commitment to act independently in the interest of European citizens.
6. Joint projects between EFSA and MS should be seen as a means of intensifying scientific cooperation and strengthening the recognition of AF members at national level as representatives of their country. This should enable members of the Forum to speak on behalf of their country and commit resources, where needed, to priorities agreed in the EURAA.
7. The EURAA to be used to joint projects potentially supported by grants from EFSA or resources identified through other (inter-)national funding schemes. AF members will be asked to indicate to which priority topics of the Agenda they will dedicate own expertise and/or find additional (inter-)national resources.

C. Interaction

In discussing the meetings, members stated that they should be restructured to foster closer cooperation by being less reliant on EFSA's lead and have a greater degree of informal interaction. In addition, meetings should include regular updates from the EC, on international issues and on EFSA mandates and allow for members to lead agenda items, such as presentation and discussion on national priorities. The AF meetings should also allow for varied contributions, such as site visits as well as presentations and make greater use of break-out group discussions (with many members requesting more breakout sessions through the questionnaire). It was also proposed that changes to AF agendas might promote greater participation, namely that the agenda be more standardised to include a rota of current issues from MS, items on emerging risks, feedback from the AFCWG, a presidency briefing, and break-out groups as a standard feature of all meetings.

Networking in between meetings was seen as a weak area which should be intensified through working groups and better active networking with more structured work between AF meetings to keep issues alive and generate more input.

Recommendations:

1. Members of the Forum representing the country holding the presidency should take an active role in the Forum meetings by co-chairing the relevant meeting and collaborating with other members to lead a discussion topic of strategic interest to the group.
2. Breakout sessions should become a normal part of each AF meeting.
3. Between meetings members should make use of modern communication tools and platforms to continue discussions from previous meetings and to initiate discussions ahead of meetings. In addition to the DMS and email, EFSA should ensure that there is investment in maintaining tools for this purpose.

D. Scientific Divergence

It was recognised that scientific divergence is possible and not always undesirable. In such cases where scientific divergence is evident, the AF has a role to play in ensuring cooperation and exchange of information so that the divergence is explained. Members stated that no opinion should be issued before there is clarity on the issues. It was recognised that the AF also has a role to anticipate potential divergence by identifying divergence in data, data gaps and uncertainties. In answer to the question posed as to whether the AF is in a position to play this role, it was recommended that the AF develop an enforceable set of guidelines for early stage detection, a process for managing potential divergence and guidance on how to communicate divergence to general public.

In order to avoid duplication of scientific studies or research projects/ programmes members pointed out that it is important to distinguish “unwanted” and “wanted” duplication, noting that “wanted” duplication can yield advantages. Therefore, cooperation from the outset of a scientific study or research project is essential. This will help categorise any intended scientific study or research and alert the potential for duplication. Information sharing, data sharing and trust between MS are the building blocks for this level of cooperation. It was suggested the AF could function as the facilitator to foster such cooperation.

Recommendations:

1. Through the sharing of information, Forum members should identify areas where there is potential for scientific divergence.
2. To this end, the proposed review of decision of the MB on the operating procedures of the Forum to commence in 2016 should make specific reference to the member's role in relation to Article 30 of the Founding Regulation.
3. In cases where scientific divergence has occurred, members are to follow the procedure outlines in the guidance agreed by the Forum at the 56th AF meeting. This guidance should be promoted within EFSA and within MS as good practice.
4. In cases of scientific divergence, members shall work together, supported by their AFCWG member, to ensure coherent communication to the wider public.

E. Contribution and Strategic Advice

To meet the needs and expectations to be active participants in the Forum, members recommended ensuring that all members present contribute to discussions, if necessary by direct questions. Other suggestions included the use of modern communication tools to “present” information ahead of AF meetings in order to optimise meeting time (such as preparing short video presentations of topics to be discussed at meetings) and to create a clear format of communication between AF Members and AFWCG. An obligation to deliver on verbal commitments made at AF meetings of working together should be followed.

AF Members considered that more advice should be given to EFSA’s ED than is currently provided. Members believe that more input should be requested in relation to creation of working groups, for example. Therefore a greater involvement of the AF in the prioritisation of EFSA’s work programme would be desirable, which could be achieved by EFSA asking for contributions before the work programme is drafted, and by EFSA taking a proactive approach in cases where the work programmes of MS are used to prepare its own work programme. The AF in turn must ensure that procedures for this kind of involvement are efficient. EFSA should ask precise questions to MS on specific topics and AF members should find ways for them to be better informed about EFSA’s activities and the activities of national bodies in their own MS. Better two way communication with regards to important items on the international level could be improved and perspectives from outside Europe should be brought to the plenary meetings.

Recommendations:

1. EFSA should consult with members at early stages of developing strategic and planning papers such as the annual Grants and Procurement Work Plan in order to get input at drafting stage rather than consultation phase.
2. In relation to international activities the communication between MS and EFSA should be strengthened to better inform strategic discussions.

F. National Networking and Article 36 organisations

To ensure close cooperation between national competent bodies and EFSA and to be more visible at national level in this role, AF Members foresaw the need to work closely with FPs and national networks and act as ambassadors for EFSA, and for the AFCWG to play a more effective ambassadorial role. The need for greater cooperation between some MS was recognised, both, to improve national cooperation and cooperation between themselves. A partnership model was put forward as a mechanism for better deployment of existing resources at both European and national levels. AF members suggested that EFSA should compile and distribute a list of contacts of MS national institutions working in the remit of EFSA among AF Members. The idea was raised for EFSA to dedicate an EFSA employee to each large MS to function as a “relationship manager” to facilitate the interaction between EFSA and that MS on scientific RA and related activities.

For the AF to ensure close cooperation between national bodies and EFSA and to represent their MS, members identified the need to strengthen the bridge between FPs and scientists of MS universities and to create formal relations/network between FPs and other non-academic institutions. Acknowledgement was made of the further development of training opportunities which would help address this. AF Members also encouraged a review of the

AFCWG to ensure clarity about its responsibilities to ensure its activities were coordinated, to be more pro-active, and to use the most appropriate tools/technologies.

Although information is currently shared, it was proposed that the flow of information be more structured in future (for example, information should formally flow from EFSA to the AF to FP to national networks; from EFSA to the AFCWG to the AF to FP to national networks). Currently, the AF does not regularly task the FP network. To enable such an information flow, the relationship between the AF and FP should be reviewed and the role of the AFCWG be redefined. A further proposal was for better feedback about the use of shared information. Members of the AF felt that this would promote greater sharing of information. AF members themselves were seen as able to spur the exchange of information by visiting national networks, to raise the profile of EFSA and provide a rationale for data/information sharing. It was also suggested that EFSA might conduct RA workshops in MS to raise visibility and to be seen to add value for MS. Members proposed that EFSA's Scientific Panels could be encouraged to hold conferences in MS around national experts. EFSA and MS should deliver workshops and joint trainings on specific topics or high-profile relevant scientific events and could host conferences with national-level MS ministers, EC seniors, national MEPS and international media. EFSA should make materials available for nationally organised events and introduce bi-laterals between ED and the heads of national competent bodies.

It was stated that there should be a serious overhaul of what EFSA expects from Article 36 organisations, the added value for organisations to be on the list and a critical review of the current list. Looking ahead, members of the AF anticipated a significant role for the MS in identifying the expertise of Article 36 organisations and their priority issues/themes over the year. An important secondary role would be for the AF to support these priorities through scientific cooperation activities, such as conferences and seminars, promoting joint projects, delivering network opportunities, and deploying FPs to facilitate networking at EU level.

Recommendations:

1. Regular dialogue should occur between the AF and the AFCWG, commencing with attendance at AFCWG by member/s of the AF for reporting and a plan of action developed through 2016.
2. The use of the FP network in organising and running national workshops (especially with Article 36 organisation) should continue, with further discussion with the network on how to give effect to additional proposals from the AF members.
3. The Country Visits, being organised by the ED, should continue as a means of facilitating bilateral discussions with national representatives and reinforcing the partnership concept with matters raised at such meetings being brought back to the Forum.
4. The process of managing the Article 36 list should be streamlined further while increasing opportunities for more involvement of Article 36 organisations in EFSA activities.
5. Training opportunities be extended and expanded to include not only to scientific network representatives, but also other members of Article 36 organisations.

G. Emerging Risks

Regarding close cooperation where EFSA or MS identify an emerging risk, it was noted that MS and EFSA interaction can be limited by the AF Members' participation in networks in their own MS. Thus there is a need to consider how best to broaden the base from which information is sourced and fed into EFSA from many MS. Achieving this will ensure there is full access to relevant information for the AF. It was proposed that "emerging risks"/horizon scanning should be a standing item or dedicated session on AF agendas with time allocated for extended discussion. Competing resource and expertise constraints as well as the prioritisation of more immediate issues, makes it difficult to focus on/invest resources into anticipating the future, whether to reduce future risks, realise efficiency gains or reduce surprises. Cooperation between MS and EFSA, between MS themselves, and through regional MS networks, is essential if the AF is to fulfil its duty on emerging risks.

Recommendation:

Emerging risks should be included as a regular item on the Agenda of AF meetings.

II. Conclusions

EFSA will work with the AF on the prioritisation and practical implementation of the proposals. While the abovementioned discussions begin to explore ways in which the AF might play a different and greater value-added role going forward, they have not concluded on definitive ways to achieve the desired outcomes. In addition, with the development of the EFSA 2020 Strategy there will be more opportunity for the Forum to play a key role in the strategic direction of food safety RA.

To summarise, the main issues arising from the discussions during the review of the operation of the AF review indicate that the Forum should:

- become a more dynamic, pro-active, 'living organism'
- concentrate on strategic rather than operational matters
- develop as a constructive network for advice, help, the acquisition of knowledge, and a repository of expertise
- acknowledge the reality of the potential for differing scientific opinion and have an established means to engage in dialogue during such events.
- strengthen communications between MS and EFSA in relation to international activities to better inform strategic discussions
- make better use of modern communications tools to interface between AF Members and EFSA, and more participatory tools for AF meetings
- establish a closer working relationship with the AFCWG
- take a more active role in the cooperation activities of the Article 36 organisations

Throughout the discussion presented above, recommendations have been made under the various headings. These recommendations should be agreed by the AF and implemented as of 2016.

Recommendations

- New members to the Forum will receive support information.
- Agenda for meetings should have active involvement of members with strategic discussions planned well in advance. Discussion documents will be provided well in advance of meetings to enable Members preparation time. Members should consult with national networks and propose items for discussion at meetings.
- EFSA should consult with members at early stages of developing strategic and planning documents.
- Presidency countries should co-chair meetings and take the lead in developing discussion items at the relevant meeting. Breakout sessions should be a regular feature of all meetings.
- Forthcoming RA information will continue to be shared in a structured way. Through the sharing of information, Forum members should identify areas where there is potential for scientific divergence.
- An alternative platform to the IEP will be implemented in the short term. Between meetings members should make use of modern communication tools and platforms, specifically developed for the purpose of continuing a dialogue between meetings.
- The EURAA will drive the priorities for joint projects, with support through the annual Grants and Procurement programme and with AF members expected to commit resources on behalf of their country. Consultation on priorities for research will continue on an annual basis.
- Members should actively promote national networking (with Article 36 organisations and representatives on EFSAs scientific networks) supported by FP members. The use of the FP network for organising and running national workshops should continue.
- The Forum should interact with other groups and networks, via Panel and Network updates at plenary meetings and occasional joint meetings (MB, FP and AFCWG). Regular dialogue should occur between the AF and the AFCWG with a plan of action developed through 2016.
- The planned review of the MB Decision on the operation of the AF should be undertaken in 2016 to include information on Article 30 interaction. The 'declaration of intent' signed at the 18th AF meeting in September 2006 should be reaffirmed and include a commitment to act in the interest of European Consumers.
- The guidance agreed by the Forum at the 56th AF meeting on Article 30 (4) scientific divergence should be followed and where there are such cases, support from the AFCWG should be sought on developing clear communications on the issue.
- The Country Visits being organised by the ED should continue to reinforcing the partnership concept and to feed back into the discussions in the Forum.