

GMO, Additives, Contaminants and Pesticides. European “Food Safety” on Behalf of the Food and Drink Conglomerates

Our food in their hands: Whose interests does the European Food Safety Authority serve?

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Theme: [Biotechnology and GMO](#), [Science and Medicine](#)

According to the website of the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA), it is the keystone of European Union (EU) risk assessment regarding food and feed safety. The website also states that the EFSA provides independent scientific advice and clear communication on existing and emerging risks and that it is an independent European agency funded by the EU budget. The authority operates separately from the European Commission, European Parliament and EU Member States.

Nice sounding words, but over half of the 209 scientists sitting on the agency’s various panels have direct or indirect ties with the industries they are meant to regulate. Indeed, according to a recent independent screening performed by Corporate Europe Observatory (CEO) and freelance journalist Stéphane Horel, almost 60% of experts sitting on EFSA panels have direct or indirect links with industries regulated by the agency.

The report ‘Unhappy Meal. The European Food Safety Authority’s independence problem’ identifies major loopholes in EFSA’s independence policy and finds that EFSA’s new rules for assessing its experts, implemented in 2012 after several conflicts of interest scandals, have failed to improve the situation (1).

The authors warn that this situation casts a severe doubt on the credibility of the scientific output of the key body responsible for food safety at the EU, with the agency issuing recommendations and risk assessments on crucial public health issues such as food additives, packaging, GMOs, contaminants and pesticides.

According to the report, the EFSA’s new rules for assessing its experts’ interests enable dozens of experts with multiple commercial interests (consultancy contracts, research funding, etc) to still be granted full membership of EFSA panels, including a majority of panel chairs and vice-chairs.

Main author Stéphane Horel said:

“We were shocked by our findings. Even without checking for undeclared interests, the number of conflicts of interest in this agency is very worrying. Experts with conflicts of interest dominate all panels but one. We found that the bulk of conflicts are from research funding and private consultancy contracts, but certain crucial institutions for scientists (scientific societies, journals) are also targeted by industry lobbying, and EFSA seems to ignore

this”.

The report also shows that EFSA failed to properly implement its own new rules in several instances and that there is no visible difference between panels assembled under the new policy and those composed using the old policy.

Martin Pigeon, researcher and campaigner at CEO, said:

“There are specific cases the agency was warned about years ago which remain a problem... We hope this report is an eye-opener on the necessity to defend public research integrity from the threats posed on public health by industry influence”.

Further concerns

On the heels of that report now comes the news that the European Commission’s Health and Consumers Directorate (SANCO) has short-listed a director of the biggest EU food industry lobby group FoodDrinkEurope among the candidates to the Management Board of the EFSA (2).

Ms Beate Kettlitz works in a leading position for the lobby group, which represents all major European food and drink corporations. Moreover, it is the second year in a row that the Commission has tried to appoint representatives from FoodDrinkEurope as Members of EFSA’s Management Board.

A year ago, the European Commission nominated FoodDrinkEurope’s Executive Director Mella Frewen (a former Monsanto lobbyist). Her appointment was rejected by the European Parliament and the Member States.

EFSA’s Management Board is key: it is the food agency’s governing body. Everyone eating food in Europe is affected by its decisions.

Martin Pigeon of CEO:

“The fact that the European Commission shortlists a food industry lobbyist, once again, for EFSA’s Management Board is an incomprehensible signal for all those concerned about the protection of consumers and the environment. Such a professional on EFSA’s board would by definition be a permanent threat to the EU’s food safety agency’s independence”

Seven seats on EFSA’s Management Board are up for renewal in June 2014. The European Commission has published a list of 23 names, mostly from national food safety agencies, research institutes and academia for the EU Parliament’s consideration and the Member States’ decision. But four persons among those short-listed also have interests in the food industry:

- Jan Mousing, re-applying for the position, is the CEO of the Danish Knowledge Centre for Agriculture, a private company describing itself as the “main supplier of professional knowledge for the agricultural professions” in Denmark;
- Piet Vanthemsche, who is also re-applying for the position, holds a leading

position in industrial farmers union COPA and also sits in MRBB holding, an agri investment fund which also has shares in companies selling GMOs.

- Alan Reilly, Chief Executive of the Irish Food Safety Authority (Ireland's public food safety administration), is also a member of the Scientific Advisory Board of the European Food Information Council (EUFIC), a Brussels-based food lobby group financed by the some of the largest private food and drink companies in Europe.
- Milan Kovac, from the Slovak Ministry of Agriculture, was a board member of ILSI Europe until 2011. ILSI Europe, an industry research institute supported by all the biggest agrofood multinationals, is a central actor in the agrofood industry's scientific influence over EFSA.

The Commission's justification for these nominations is an industry-friendly interpretation of EFSA's founding regulation, which states that four of the 14 board members "shall have a background in organisations representing consumers and other interests in the food chain".

In their recent joint press release, CEO and Testbiotech note that nowhere is it mentioned that the food industry should be involved, in fact quite the contrary: EFSA's 2011 independence rules stipulate that "persons employed by industry shall not be allowed to become members of EFSA's Scientific Committee, Scientific Panels and working groups."

Such trends are worrying to say the least. Writer and researcher William F Engdahl has already alluded to a 'cancer of corruption' between the biotech sector and the EFSA (3). And this year, Friends of the Earth Europe (FoE) and GM Freeze released their own research report that expressed serious health-related concerns over the excessive and largely unmonitored use of glyphosate (weedkiller) in Europe (4). Very valid concerns, considering recent research pertaining to the health impacts (5). In 2011, Earth Open Source said that official approval of glyphosate had been rash, problematic and deeply flawed. A comprehensive review of existing data released in June 2011 by Earth Open Source suggested that industry regulators in Europe had known for years that glyphosate causes birth defects in the embryos of laboratory animals. Questions were thus raised about the role of the powerful agro-industry in rigging data pertaining to product safety and its undue influence on regulatory bodies (6).

The aim of powerful private companies is to make money, to maximise profit for shareholders. Any safety requirements are secondary concerns, if they are concerns at all. Therefore, we expect bodies like the EFSA to take up these concerns on our behalf and to resist the food lobby and agribusiness in their attempts to translate their massive financial clout into political influence, not least where its own Management Board and 'expert panels' are concerned.

On its website, the EFSA states:

"Food is essential to life. We are committed to ensuring food safety in Europe."

Is it?

Get involved, be informed and resist corruption and the corporate takeover of Europe: Visit <http://corporateeurope.org/get-involved#>

Notes

- 1) <http://corporateeurope.org/efsa/2013/10/unhappy-meal-european-food-safety-authoritys-independence-problem>
- 2) <http://corporateeurope.org/pressreleases/2013/12/european-commission-nominates-food-lobbyist-eu-food-safety-agencys-management>
- 3) <http://www.globalresearch.ca/stench-of-eu-corruption-in-monsanto-gmo-whitewash/5316294>
- 4) http://www.foeeurope.org/sites/default/files/press_releases/foee_media_briefing_glyphosate.pdf
- 5) <http://www.nationofchange.org/study-links-monsanto-s-roundup-autism-parkinson-s-and-alzheimer-s-1367764115>
- 6) http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/06/24/roundup-scientists-birth-defects_n_883578.html

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