

'Huge and growing' interest in the EU say European parliament and BusinessEurope presidents: theparliament.com

By Sue Davies
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The European food safety authority's recently strengthened policy on independence and scientific decision-making ensures that the authority delivers impartial and objective advice, writes Sue Davies.

The recent commentary on this website by [PAN Europe](#) about the European food safety authority (EFSA) presents a very misleading view of the authority's approach and priorities.

Apart from containing a number of unsubstantiated claims about EFSA's scientific experts, the article is misleading about the authority's work on cumulative risk assessment (CRA) of pesticides.

CRA is a complex scientific area concerning the cumulative effects of consumer exposure to pesticides. The latest step in EFSA's work involves the development of a methodology to group together pesticides with similar chemical structures and toxic effects – known as cumulative assessment groups (CAGs). The next major element involves the assessment of human exposure to multiple chemicals.

Contrary to PAN Europe's claims, EFSA's work on CRA is already well under way. As anyone who visits our website will see, in July 2013 the authority put its methodology for defining CAGs out to public consultation.

Far from playing into the hands of commercial operators, the outcome of this consultation – published in the last few days – highlights that it is industry that has the most reservations about EFSA's approach, deeming it to be too precautionary. Our approach takes into account current gaps in scientific knowledge and aims to ensure a high level of consumer protection.

The process has taken time but any delays reflect the complexity of the science at hand not, as PAN Europe claim, because of efforts by industry to infiltrate EFSA's work.

Apart from anything, the scientific panel system at EFSA means that no one expert, including the chair, can unduly influence the decisions of the whole group. The conclusions of an EFSA Panel – comprising 21 scientists – are always the outcome of collective deliberations and collective decisions.

This is but one of the several safeguards in place at EFSA to ensure the impartiality of our scientific advice.

I believe that many of the differences of opinion between PAN Europe and EFSA come down to our respective interpretations of what constitutes a 'conflict of interest'. Contributing to an EU-funded research

project or attending a meeting sponsored by industry should not automatically exclude an expert from working for EFSA, as PAN Europe seem to be suggesting.

The key is to balance correctly the need for the highest-quality expertise in our scientific panels with the need to ensure that the scientific advice they deliver is impartial and objective.

With EFSA's recently strengthened policy on independence and scientific decision-making, I strongly believe that the authority is striking the correct balance.

The steps taken towards enhancing transparency, including open panel meetings, which we will be expanding on in the coming year, and open consultations also means the work is open to wider scrutiny.

Finally, there is also an important point to make here about the professionalism and integrity of EFSA's experts. These are top scientists, employed by food safety agencies in the member states, research bodies or universities, who voluntarily give significant amounts of their time to work in the public interest.

Their experience provides access to the most recent scientific knowledge and the best multi-disciplinary expertise at a level impossible for EFSA to achieve on its own. Without these experts, the EU system to protect consumers from food-related risks would simply cease to exist.

EFSA's Management Board is very grateful for the work that they do.

Sue Davies is chair of European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) management board