“Safeguarding trust in food safety for the long term”

The European Commission has presented a legislative proposal for more transparency in scientific studies in the field of food safety. Dr. Bernhard Url, Executive Director of the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA), on the background and implications.

Dr. Url, how do you view the initiative of the European Commission?

I see the Commission’s proposal as a great opportunity to adapt the EU’s General Food Law, which is now 15 years old, to today’s needs so that it remains viable for the future. This does not mean that the principles laid down in it, above all the principle of risk assessment, are outdated. On the contrary, the Commission only recently asserted that the regulation, which also created EFSA in 2002, is as relevant as ever. It has achieved its core objectives of ensuring a high level of protection of consumer health and the smooth functioning of the internal market, and our food is safer today than it was 15 years ago.

Where can improvements be made?

We have strict and sometimes unclear confidentiality requirements with regard to the information submitted by companies when it comes to the assessment of risks from applications for regulated products for approval, such as pesticides and GMOs *(genetically modified organisms)*. This aspect, together with EFSA’s legal obligation to base its work also on industry studies, leads to a perceived lack of transparency and independence. In addition, there are indications that it could become difficult in the long term with the current panel system to secure the necessary scientific expertise. The Commission’s proposal aims to address these issues and to increase transparency and sustainability.

What role has the debate on the plant protection product glyphosate played in this?

The influence of the glyphosate debate on the proposed changes cannot be ignored. The controversy was never solely about renewing the approval of an active substance. It was the expression of wider societal trends: a general loss of trust in politics and science as well as increased expectations regarding transparency and participation. The successful European Citizens’ Initiative on glyphosate gave political weight to these ideas, and the Commission responded to them and others with its proposal to strengthen transparency in the scientific evaluations and to increase the reliability and independence of the underlying studies.

What concrete measures should be taken to achieve this?

The proposal provides that, in principle, all studies and documents submitted to EFSA for risk assessment purposes should be made public on our website. EFSA would decide on well-founded, legally precise exceptions. If the proposal is accepted, it would move us a big step forward on our path towards an open EFSA. Other proposed measures in this direction are public consultations on the studies submitted and a register of commissioned studies, which would allow EFSA to verify whether an applicant has transmitted all studies at its disposal. In addition, the Commission would have the possibility, in exceptional cases, to mandate EFSA to commission additional studies for review purposes.

What effect do you foresee these measures will have?

All this would not only increase transparency, but also strengthen public participation and thus help to bridge the perceived gap between risk assessment and society. In addition, the scientific work would be done on a broader basis. Open raw data, access to the latest research results and more minds to deal with them increase the likelihood of identifying potential risks in the food chain and ultimately create more safety for the consumer. Overall, the proposed measures could therefore strengthen public trust in the independence and robustness of our work – but it must also be clear that additional tasks require additional resources.

What does the Commission proposal mean for the Member States?

The proposal suggests stronger involvement of Member States in order to ensure the sustainability of the European risk assessment model also in the future. For example, they would be represented on EFSA's Management Board and be able to propose experts for EFSA's scientific panels. In addition, it may in future be possible for national scientific organisations that work with us to produce preliminary opinions, which would then be submitted to the panels for review and approval. This would ease the burden on EFSA and speed up our work. It would also benefit the Member States, as better financial compensation would be provided for the performance of preparatory work, as well as for the dispatch of experts.

Are there also factors you see critically?

In all these initiatives, we must ensure that EFSA's independence is maintained. This also applies to risk communication, where we welcome the aim for better coordination at EU and national level, but which must not be at the expense of our independence. It will be intriguing to see how the European Parliament and the Council will comment on the Commission's proposals. Personally, I am convinced that a more transparent risk assessment process and even closer cooperation with strong partners such as the BfR are important steps towards safeguarding trust in food safety for the long-term and jointly tackling the challenges of tomorrow.

Thank you for the interview, Mr. Url.

Dr. Bernhard Url,
Executive Director of the European Food Safety Authority

General Food Law

Regulation (EC) No 178/2002 lays down the general principles of the EU General Food Law. It was adopted following a series of food crises in the late 1990s. In April 2018, the European Commission presented a proposal for its revision, which is currently under consideration by the European Parliament and the Council. The proposal follows a four-year fitness check, a public consultation and a European citizens' initiative.