

**Food safety agency's reliability faces fresh criticism**

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<http://www.euractiv.com/cap/food-safety-agencys-reliability-faces-fresh-criticism-news-510827>

The EU agency charged with reviewing the safety of biotech crops, food and fertilisers has "frequent conflicts of interest" with the industries it is supposed to evaluate, says a report that adds renewed doubts about its scientific assessments.

The report by two campaign groups, the Corporate Europe Observatory and the Earth Open Source, documents cases where the European Food Safety Authority uses industry scientists and information in risk assessments that are used by EU institutions and national governments.

"Too often it's not independent science that underlies EFSA decisions about our food safety, but industry data," says the report 'Conflicts on the menu'.

"Many EFSA panel members have ties with biotech, food, or pesticide companies. EFSA's rules allow blatant conflicts of interest to persist," says the report, released yesterday (14 February).

Claire Robinson, research director of London-based Earth Open Source and an author of the study, told EurActiv that EFSA "needs an overhaul from the bottom up."

But Lucia de Luca, senior media relations officer for EFSA, dismissed the study as "biased and unfounded."

"It is a recycling of previous misinterpretations of our work," she said by telephone from EFSA's headquarters in Parma, Italy.

De Luca also dismissed allegations that outside organisations have special influence on EFSA's work, saying: "Our experts take into account all the scientific information available."

#### Independence policy

In December, EFSA's management acknowledged widening concerns about its reputation and outlined steps to ensure independence, including improving transparency in its risk assessments. It is planning a workshop in March to present new guidelines.

"Since its creation, the European Food Safety Authority has put in place a range of initiatives to safeguard its core values and build trust in its work," the policy statement says.

"However, concerns in relation to objectivity of scientific advice are widespread in public opinions through the European Union, also for what concerns areas falling within EFSA's remit."

The decade-old agency has been under fire in the past. Some member states have criticised EFSA, in particular accusing it of approving genetically modified products without proper research and relying too much on information provided by the biotech industry.

Satu Hassi, who sits on the European Parliament's Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety, says there have been worries about the independence of the EFSA expressed by MEPs and her own Green party.

"During the years I have been in the European Parliament it has been numerous times that I have been made aware of criticism of people working for EFSA who are too close to the biotech industry and other food-related industries," the Finnish MEP said from Strasbourg.

Peer review, more staff

Among its recommendations, the report by the Corporate Europe Observatory and the Earth Open Source urges the EU to:

\*Require assessments to be done by independent laboratories paid with public funds rather than industry resources.

\*Require peer reviews of EFSA assessments.

\*Bar scientists and experts with conflicts from serving on EFSA expert panels.

Robinson said the food agency also lacks staff and resources, forcing it to rely on industry-funded research or experts, something EFSA officials have in the past acknowledged.

"They need to be properly funded and funded in such a way that allows them to be independent of industry," Robinson said.

Robinson, who is also affiliated with the GMWatch campaign group in Britain, suggests that corporations pay a fee to have their products tested, rather than providing grants or expertise for the research.

Positions:

□ EFSA presented a draft of its policy on independence at a meeting in Brussels on 12 October. In his address to the gathering, John Dalli, commissioner for Health and Consumer Policy, said: "I can underline that over the years the independence provisions have been strengthened considerably and have contributed significantly to the fact that EFSA's reputation is one of a truly independent body offering solid scientific advice.

"EFSA's rigorous scientific output has been the very backbone of many of our legislative initiatives. It has also been the basis of our risk management decisions, some of which have dealt with very serious threats to the food chain – the recent E. coli crisis being a very good example," he said.

Next steps:

5 March: EFSA to hold a public programme on its 'Policy on Independence'

External Links [include the new report]

Corporate Europe Observatory and Earth Open Source: Conflicts on the menu

[http://www.corporateeurope.org/sites/default/files/publications/Conflicts %20on the menu final\\_0.pdf](http://www.corporateeurope.org/sites/default/files/publications/Conflicts%20on%20the%20menu%20final_0.pdf)