
How can EFSA's independence be secured?

Testbiotech critical of the newly drafted policy on the independence of the European Food Safety Authority

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The European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) has published a new draft policy on its independence and scientific decision-making, and is inviting comments from the public. Testbiotech is demanding the newly drafted policy is substantially improved. According to Testbiotech, EFSA should give priority to gaining more independence specifically in regard to the influence from agrifood industries. This is not the case with the current draft.

The protection of health and the environment has clearly not been given priority in the draft policy over and above the interests of businesses. EFSA is saying that all interests should be treated equally and impartially. Therefore, Testbiotech is demanding that the EFSA – in respect of its independence – should take specific measures to avoid being influenced by the agrifood industry. In this regard, the EFSA position should be to give preference to the interests of the general public and, more particularly, the protection of health and the environment.

“We expect EFSA to do its job of applying high standards to scientific expertise and clearly defining the real risks and uncertainties. One of the preconditions here must be the thorough scrutiny afforded to the selection of experts, which is needed in order to push back against the predominant influence of the agrifood sector,” Christoph Then says for Testbiotech. “Currently, the industry is treating science as a service fuelling their interests. The authority, which was established to protect health and the environment, needs to rebalance the system.”

There are, in addition, many details that will require improvement e.g. the EFSA criteria for the assessment of potential conflicts of interest are far too narrow. It is not the whole range of EFSA activities that are taken into account when assessing the interests of the experts, but in many cases only the specific topic that that particular expert is working on. Industries in the relevant sectors network very closely, so this kind of approach on the part of EFSA is inadequate for dealing with the real problems.

A cooling-off period is foreseen only in cases where for example experts were employed by industry. But is not required if experts were heavily lobbying in relevant sectors without being officially employed for this purpose, or if experts were actively involved in organisations with close affiliations to industries. For example, in the past, organisations such as the International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI), which is financed by industry, were found to have a serious impact on the work of the EFSA. Nevertheless, in the new draft policy it appears that even in future experts who were actively engaged in ILSI working groups for many years can have unimpeded access to EFSA via the revolving doors.

There are other serious weaknesses in the draft, such as the possibility for experts working for EFSA to still be able to get research funding from industry – this can be anything of up to 25 percent of their overall research budget.

Testbiotech is also very critical of the fact that EFSA is willing to accept any expert nominated by a member state. Currently, there are no harmonised standards for protecting the independence of national authorities.

Crucial parts of the newly drafted EFSA policy are contrary to demands made by the EU Parliament that have recently been adopted by the budget committee of the EU Parliament. These demands include requesting a cooling-off period from all material interests related to the commercial agrifood sector.

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