

Monsanto's secret sponsoring: EFSA not providing details

4 September 2017 / The European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) has rejected any suggestion that the participation of any of its experts in a conference was indirectly funded by Monsanto. But the authority is showing little interest in investigating the matter: In their recent written communication, EFSA has not answered any of the crucial questions contained in a letter sent to them by Testbiotech.

Jose Tarazona, head of the Pesticide Unit at EFSA, was included in the preliminary conference program and listed as one of the participants in the final program for the annual conference of the Society of Toxicology (SOT) in the US in March 2017. The final program noted additional funding for Tarazona's contribution. The sponsor was the British toxicologist Allister Vale, who according to the content of confidential emails, had organised this event in close cooperation with Monsanto. It was in this context that the secret sponsoring by Monsanto was agreed.

Since the participation of Mr Tarazona was announced in both versions of the program, it can be assumed that not only was he asked to participate but also accepted the invitation. Finally, another EFSA staff member attended the conference to defend the authorisation of the herbicide glyphosate and declare it to be non-carcinogenic. This detail adds even more complexity to the case but does not make the concerns arising from this matter any less relevant. In the light of these findings, Testbiotech asked the executive director of EFSA, Mr Bernhard Url, several specific questions such as:

- Who sent the official invitation to attend the conference and who received it?
- Was Mr Tarazona offered funding as a private person?
- Why did Mr Tarazona not give the presentation at the conference?
- Was Ms Court-Marques offered some funding as well?
- Who exactly offered funding to whom?
- For what purpose was the funding offered and / or paid?
- In this case, what was the amount of money offered and / or paid?
- Was EFSA informed about the offer of sponsoring?
- Are there any consequences EFSA is ready to take?

In a response to Testbiotech, Bernhard Url states: "The insinuation generated in your letters that EFSA staff would be indirectly funded by an applicant company is untrue."

Against the above background, this statement cannot be regarded as sufficient. As the wording of the confidential emails shows, the funding provided by industry was organised secretly to allow all involved stakeholders to appear to be completely "hands off". In fact, a professional investigation might be required in order to provide some clarity in this matter since a violation of laws with a criminal intent cannot be excluded. The allegation is mostly directed against Monsanto, which apparently uses various hidden channels for funding stakeholders to influence decision-making on the further authorisation of its herbicide glyphosate. If, and how, EFSA staff members were involved has to be one of the central aspects of this investigation. Testbiotech has now sent letters to the Board of EFSA and the EU-Commission urging further clarification.

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