

Leading European Food Safety Authority Staff Member Moves into Industry

A leading staff member of the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) has quit to work in industry. Suzy Renckens, scientific coordinator of the GMO panel, officially represented Syngenta in an expert hearing at EU level in 2008. She now holds a position there as Head of Biotech Regulatory Affairs for Europe, Africa and the Middle East. The Swiss company Syngenta is one of the world's leading producers of genetically engineered plants.

At the EFSA Mrs Renckens headed the GMO panel which has been responsible for developing guidance documents and the risk assessment of genetically engineered plants since the authority was established in 2002. She worked in that position until the end of 2007 and represented the EFSA in several meetings with industry. Previous to her position at the EFSA she worked in the same field for licensing authorities in Belgium. Her direct move from the EFSA to Syngenta might damage the reputation of the authority since it has already been criticised for being too close to the interests of industry.

"This move to industry poses a considerable problem for the EFSA," says Christoph Then, executive director of the German expert group Testbiotech. "It has become apparent that even staff members in leading positions are unable to distance themselves from industry. It also begs the question of why the EFSA does not make information on such unusual steps public. There is absolutely no transparency at all in the circumstances surrounding the direct move by Mrs Renckens from the EFSA to industry."

The EFSA declined to make any detailed comments on this case. After Testbiotech became aware of Renckens' move it filed a questionnaire directly to the EFSA. Emphasis was placed on the question of whether Syngenta might have unjustifiably benefited by acquiring one of EFSA's leading staff members. The EFSA stated that it is unable to provide information related to individual staff members. According to EU staff regulations, all moves must be approved when EU employees take up a new position where there may be a possible conflict of interests with EU authorities. Testbiotech believes that the circumstances of this move should be made transparent. EU regulations further state that a move without approval is possible only after two years. In Mrs Renckens' case the maximum period of time between her engagement with the EFSA and her position at Syngenta is one year.

More information:

Interview with Suzy Renckens:

www.efsa.europa.eu/EFSA/DocumentSet/comm_efsanews_02_en.pdf [1]

Link Suzy Renckens at Syngenta: www.europabio.org/JRC%20docs/13_Syngenta.pdf [2]

Link FOE about EFSA:

http://www.foeeurope.org/press/2009/Jun30_EFSA_back_in_bed_with_GMO.html [3]

Link EU Staff Regulations:

http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/personnel_administration/statut/tocen100.pdf [4]

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Links

[1] http://www.efsa.europa.eu/EFSA/DocumentSet/comm_efsanews_02_en.pdf

[2] http://www.europabio.org/JRC%20docs/13_Syngenta.pdf

[3] http://www.foeeurope.org/press/2009/Jun30_EFSA_back_in_bed_with_GMO.html

[4] http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/personnel_administration/statut/tocen100.pdf