

Conflicts of interest: EU Ombudsman calls for more transparency

Complaint about the way the EU Commission handles risk research projects

5 August 2016 / The European Ombudsman, Emily O'Reilly, has made a decision on a complaint filed by Testbiotech. The complaint was directed at the EU Commission and its management of conflicts of interest in publicly funded risk research projects. The EU Ombudsman decided that there was no clear evidence for maladministration at the EU Commission. However, she is backing some of the most relevant Testbiotech requests and saying that the EU Commission should consider a fuller and more thorough explanation of why it takes the view that the links between industry and scientists do not create conflicts of interest. Furthermore, in future, the names of experts involved in the evaluation of the specific research topics should be published along with their declarations of interests.

The reason for the complaint was a publicly funded research project called GRACE which aimed to investigate the risks of genetically engineered plants. Testbiotech has shown in several reports that industrial nepotism appeared to be prevalent within this project. The complaint was filed in March 2015. Furthermore, in November 2015, Testbiotech found evidence of similar problems in the context of other EU projects in the same area. Nevertheless, the EU Commission rejected the Testbiotech findings without giving any detailed reasons. Now, however, the decision made by the EU Ombudsman implies that substantial changes are necessary for the future.

“There is a general problem with a strong bias in the risk research and risk assessment of genetically engineered organisms that favours industry. There are multi-layered links to the biotech industry. And the problem cannot be reduced to payments for specific experts. For example, intellectual bias is significant in the activities of organisations that have a strong affiliation to industry. Similarly, the struggle to find funding is of major relevance”, says Christoph Then for Testbiotech. “In reality, health and the environment are not given much priority.”

The problem with bias in risk assessment not only concerns specific research projects, but also research institutions and the relevant EU authorities. For example, the European Food Safety Authority EFSA, has been repeatedly confronted with issues relating to conflicts of interest within its expert panels. And up to now, EFSA could not find a convincing solution. Just recently, the executive director of EFSA, Bernhard Url, suggested that while payments from industry to EFSA experts should be regarded as a conflict of interest, their “intellectual bias” should simply be ignored in future.

“Looking away or intentional ignorance means that these problems simply get bigger and bigger,” says Christoph Then. “It is time for a change. Implementing the decision of the EU Ombudsman could be an important first step. We have to take measures to prevent science from becoming abused by industry. What we need in addition to transparency are strict and clear rules to avoid conflicts of interest.”

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The EU Ombudsman decision: www.testbiotech.org/node/1700

The complaint as filed: www.testbiotech.org/node/1182

Most recent Testbiotech report on the GRACE project: www.testbiotech.org/node/1436

The proposal of EFSA Executive Director Bernhard Url on future standards regarding conflicts of interest: www.testbiotech.org/node/1701