

EFSA wants to avoid inappropriate proximity to industry in future

No more co-authorship of EFSA members of staff with the biotech industry

17 July 2018 / In response to a letter from Testbiotech, the Executive Director of the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA), Bernhard Url, announced to “ensure that in the future EFSA staff members will no longer co-author scientific publications with industry affiliated scientists”. Testbiotech recently complained about a publication on the risks of cultivating genetically engineered maize in Spain. The main author, Yann Devos works for EFSA; one of the co-authors, Alan Raybould, works for Syngenta, a company that wants to sell its genetically engineered maize seeds.

Now such co-authored publications will no longer be allowed. As EFSA writes in a letter received by Testbiotech, such cases “*may give rise to the perception of inappropriate proximity of staff members from EFSA to industry*”.

“We consider this to be an important decision that will in future stop any co-authorship of EFSA members of staff with industry affiliated scientists,” Christoph Then says for Testbiotech. “However, we are still waiting for more generally robust standards to secure a more coherent approach on how EFSA experts will avoid inappropriate proximity to industry and conflicts of interests in future.”

In this context, Testbiotech is requesting clear guidance on the participation of EFSA experts in industry projects, conferences and workshops. The publication brought to public attention by Testbiotech originated from a conference called the “International Symposium on the Biosafety of Genetically Modified Organisms”. The conference was organised by the “International Society for Biosafety Research” (ISBR). There is only very little information available on the funding of the ISBR. It is, however, known that its conferences are regularly sponsored by biotech corporations such as Monsanto, Bayer, Dow AgroSciences, DuPont and Syngenta, as well as the international federation of the genetic engineering industry, CropLife International. Further, the ISBR management board consists mainly of representatives from the biotech industry. In 2016, Yann Devos, an EFSA employee, joined the board as program director. For Testbiotech, this case shows that there are no sufficiently rigorous restrictions in place on close collaboration between EFSA employees and representatives of regulated industries.

EFSA is not the only institution concerned in this context: just a few weeks ago, another publication was revealed; it was from the same conference and was co-authored by experts from the German regulatory authority (BVL) and the US biotech corporation DowDuPont. The publication is about new methods being used in genetic engineering, such as applications of the nuclease CRISPR-Cas. This collaboration seems to be highly inappropriate: DowDupont has filed dozens of patents in this field and wants to introduce a genetically engineered maize in the near future, which is changed in its starch composition by application of CRISPR. Testbiotech now expects the German government to enforce the new EFSA standards and take further measures to increase the independence of its experts.

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Further informations:

The letter from Testbiotech: www.testbiotech.org/node/2233

The answer from EFSA: www.testbiotech.org/node/2234

Joint publication of EFSA with industry experts:

www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0167880918301075

Joint publication of German regulatory authorities with industry experts:

www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fbioe.2018.00079/full