



Involving NGOs and consumer groups in the expert panels of the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) could help tackle the never-ending criticism of the Authority by some of these organisations - a conference in Brussels was told this week.

Other stakeholders wanted EFSA to broadcast TV adverts advising people what to eat (and in what quantity) as well as to reform the food labelling regime in Europe.

The results of the workshop, organised by SAFE (Safe Food Advocacy Europe), will be formally presented at the EFSA stakeholder conference in Parma on 30-31 May - the first meeting of its newly enlarged stakeholder group.

The most troubling aspect of the workshop was that there was no attempt to focus on what EFSA is responsible for and what it is not.

The lack of public understanding of its role has been one of the Authority's biggest problems since its inception.

Other better informed delegates stressed that 99% of EFSA Opinions were not contested and said there should be an evaluation of the few - less than 1% - which were disputed.

There were also familiar calls for greater transparency, for more data to be in the public domain and for a fresh analysis of EFSA's independence policy.

The consumer view

The workshop involved people from companies such as Nestle and trade associations such as HOTREC and the German food association, BLL, as well as consumer groups and NGOs.

The workshop - whose stated aim was to "resolve EFSA's problems" - was led by a management consultancy, DesignThinkersAcademy, which started its presentation with a series of recorded interviews with consumers.

Most of them wanted to avoid any food with a chemical in it, particularly an E number, to eat organic and avoid anything processed.

However, the consumers appeared to be largely high income, well-educated people rather than from lower socio-economic groups. Interestingly, none of them mentioned the cost of anything.

Delegates were asked to write comments on post-it notes using statements by the consumers which "struck a chord".

One of the consumers' main complaints was about confusing labels with too much information which were difficult to understand. They also greatly distrusted what the food industry said.

This area is clearly well outside the remit of EFSA but one of the breakout groups focused on it entirely and called for the Authority to carry out a survey and make labelling recommendations.

Delegates worked in five groups and put their post-it notes on the wall, focusing on the main points made by the consumers. They then analysed what actions EFSA could take to deal with the problems.

One group suggested that EFSA should talk directly to consumers and produce 15-20 second TV commercials - public service announcements - telling people how much food to consume and which foods to eat.

Yet tailoring dietary advice remains the responsibility of member states.

EFSA on Twitter

This group also thought EFSA should communicate directly, à la Trump, on Twitter.

Another group focused more on how stakeholders could be part of the process at EFSA, rather than just participate in consultations on Opinions and guidance.

Some delegates felt that EFSA was still reluctant to publish information and data and should be more proactive.

They argued that the "default position of EFSA is to withhold information rather than publish it, which generates mistrust", according to Ignacio Vazquez of the NGO, Changing Markets.

But the EFSA official, Stephen Pagani, argued that the authority had already embarked on a policy of providing open data as much as possible. "That is the road EFSA is going down," he said.



Some of the issues raised during the session were relevant to EFSA: transparency; who pays for scientific studies - whether industry should just pay a small tax each year; and whether EFSA should supervise independent research to look at safety of products.

But many of the topics discussed were clearly risk management tasks and well outside EFSA's remit.

And overall, the major downside of the session was that nobody explained what EFSA is responsible for and what it does not do.

If the cacophony of ideas is repeated at the EFSA stakeholder conference, it is hard to see how that will help EFSA.

Rather the ideas will serve to reinforce a very muddled view of the Authority's role, making it harder to deal with calls from NGOs for it to act in areas outside its remit of science and risk assessment.