



Breaking News on Food & Beverage Development - Europe

EFSA denies conflict of interest allegations

By Caroline Scott-Thomas+, 25-Oct-2013

Related topics: Food safety and labelling, Legislation, Food safety

An NGO report alleging widespread conflicts of interests within the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) takes 'a different approach' to defining potential conflicts – but is an interesting contribution to the science and society debate, EFSA has said.

The report, from NGO Corporate Observatory Europe (CEO), claims that almost 60% of experts sitting on EFSA panels have direct or indirect links with industries regulated by the agency.

However, chair of EFSA's management board Sue Davies said the report demonstrated that what constitutes a conflict of interest remained open to interpretation.

"The Management Board is confident that the policy EFSA has in place to ensure independence in its scientific work is robust," she said in a [statement](#) .

The CEO report said that EFSA had shown dedication and good will in addressing its concerns about experts' independence, inviting it to its headquarters in June to scrutinise its policy. But it added: *"EFSA's independence policy has many flaws."*

'Too narrow'

In particular, CEO says EFSA's independence rules are "insufficient in the sense that they are too narrow".

"In other words, any scientist with ties to the commercial sector can still be accepted as long as the interest is not related to the panel's topic. This is in our view the biggest loophole in the rules, and probably the one main factor explaining our results," the report said.

EFSA responded: *"In identifying potential conflicts of interest for EFSA experts, CEO considered that experts should have no contacts with industry in any of the areas that fall within the Authority's broad remit. EFSA, however, has a different approach and considers for example, that scientific assessment by an Animal Health and Welfare Panel member is not impaired should the expert be conducting research in a different area, such as human nutrition funded by a commercial operator."*

No industry employees allowed

"Importantly however, no-one employed by industry or as a full-time consultant can be an expert on an EFSA Panel or Working Group."

The CEO report also said that EFSA was over-reliant on experts self-reporting conflicts of interest, and had an insufficient understanding of what constitutes a conflict.

Davies added that many of the questions raised in the report should be part of a wider discussion, beyond EFSA alone.

"This report raises questions that go beyond mere processes and policies at EFSA, questions that speak to the broader relationship between science and society," she wrote. *"These may have to do with private/public partnerships in research, the human and financial resources dedicated to risk assessment and the legislative framework for regulated products. These are issues that EFSA cannot resolve on its own, and need to be part of a wider debate."*

Access the full CEO [report here](#) (pdf).

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