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We want to get rid of conflict of interests in the EU agencies!

As the debate over independence and conflicts of interest in scientific assessments continues to heat up, Members of the EU Parliament's Environment committee organised an exchange of views this morning with the Court of Auditors and the European agencies on Medicines, Chemicals and Food (EMA, ECHA, and EFSA respectively). The aim of the meeting was to undertake a comprehensive analysis of these agencies' approach in dealing with potential conflicts of interest. **Greens/EFA MEPs called for more stringent measures to avoid any corporate bias in the agencies' evaluations and conclusions.**

This discussion comes just one day after EFSA's Management Board voted on its revised independence policy, unfortunately ignoring some of the more pressing demands repeated by the European Parliament over the last four years, notably in the annual discharge reports on how EFSA spent its budget. These calls have also been echoed by more than 200 MEPs, NGO representatives, academics and individual citizens during a public consultation on EFSA's draft independence policy.

Indeed, despite notable improvements in the domain of transparency - the members of the expert groups will now have to file a public declaration of interests - the rest is still insufficient.

One of the key controversies is around the implementation of a cooling-off period, which we think should prevent those that have been paid or funded by industry **on any of the issues dealt with in EFSA** from working for the agency or from participating in their scientific panels. But contrary to what EFSA's press release is implying, the necessary changes have not really been made. Indeed, experts will only be screened with regards to the specific expert group they are applying too. This means, for example, that an expert could be paid by the agri-food industry and still evaluate a pesticide, as long as they are not directly paid by the pesticide industry. This loophole overlooks the complex and close commercial and other links in this sector.

The new rules now consider that research funding making up more than 25% of the total research budget might imply a conflict of interest. While this is welcome, it is still a questionable threshold. More worrisome is the fact that public-private partnerships seem to be considered by the agency to have zero risks of conflict of interests, an analysis we do not share.

There were also recommendations that the current cooling off period should not only be extended in scope, as explained above, but also in length - from two to five years. This, however, was also rejected because, [EFSA claims](#), "If implemented, it would result in a loss of roughly double the current expertise lost with [the] 2 years cooling off [period]".

In a nutshell, despite EFSA's new policy, it is still possible for EFSA to ask experts who receive funding from the food, pesticide or biotechnology industry (in particular research funding) to be appointed to the agency's scientific panels. These are the panels that evaluate the toxicity of new food products (including pesticides, additives, GMOs etc.) before they are allowed to be put on the market.

A [recent report](#) by the NGO Corporate Europe Observatory has showed that 46% of members of EFSA's scientific panels currently have financial conflicts of interest with the agribusiness and food industries.

Let us be clear: the question here is of course not to accuse these scientists of manipulating the panels to please industry, but there is scientific research that proves that financial links to industry have a measurable influence on research conclusions. This is why the question of conflicts of interest is so important: nobody is impartial, and while a lot of personal bias could be dealt with through collective decision-making, when almost half of the members of EFSA's scientific panels have financial links to the agribusiness and food industries, the risks become too great to be left unaddressed.

[EFSA's experts claim](#) that it would make the task of finding relevant and skilled experts too complicated if more robust conflicts of interest rules are introduced. This raises an important - and troubling - question: why is there now such a small number of scientists (biologists, geneticists, toxicologists, etc...) who can claim that they have not received funding from industry in the last 2 years? What does this say about our research system? Isn't it time to have public funds again for environmental research and to stop the drastic recent dependence on publicly-privately funded research?

We need to have independent scientists who are able to evaluate the impact of new technologies and products before regulators allow them to be released in our environment and in our food. And we need our EU agencies to be able to keep doing the extremely important work they are doing with a high level of quality and credibility.

This is what the Green/EFA Group will continue to fight for!

For more information:

- Check out [EFSA's experts' analysis of the public consultation and their proposals](#):
- Read our submission to EFSA's public consultation on their new independence policy:

I am writing to submit a comment to your public consultation on your draft new independence policy, in particular, on section "3. A risk-based approach to prevent the occurrence of conflicts of interest".

I welcome the fact that the EFSA is working on tightening its rules on potential conflict of interests, as was asked repeatedly by the European Parliament. Unfortunately, this draft is still short from achieving these goals.

Indeed the draft is ignoring one of the main demands from the European Parliament, which is that the cooling-off period should apply to "all material interests related to the companies whose products are assessed by the Authority and to any organisations funded by them"¹. This should absolutely include the funding (including research funding) of the experts appointed to the agency's scientific panels. These panels play a major role in assessing the toxicity of potentially dangerous substances to be realised on the European Union's market by the industry. There is no denying that huge economic interests are at stake in this matter and that conflicts of interests might arise within these panels.

In addition, a two-year cooling-off period is insufficient and should be increased to a period of five years.

¹ See [The European Parliament's report on discharge in respect of the implementation of the budget of the European Food Safety Authority for the financial year 2015](#)

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