



Press release No. 20/2011

Ombudsman: EFSA should strengthen procedures to avoid potential conflicts of interest in 'revolving door' cases

14 December 2011

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The European Ombudsman, P. Nikiforos Diamandouros, has called on the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) to strengthen its rules and procedures in order to avoid potential conflicts of interest in 'revolving door' cases. This follows a complaint from a German NGO, alleging that EFSA failed to address a conflict of interest arising from the move of an EFSA Head of Unit to a biotechnology company.

EFSA Head of Unit moved to biotechnology company

The European Food Safety Authority, which is based in Parma, Italy, is in charge of risk assessment in the EU regarding (human) food and (animal) feed safety. Its role is to provide independent scientific advice and information on existing and emerging risks, in collaboration with national authorities and other stakeholders.

In March 2010, a German NGO turned to the Ombudsman, complaining that EFSA did not adequately address a potential conflict of interest concerning the move of the Head of EFSA's Genetically Modified Organisms (GMO) Unit to a biotechnology company in 2008. According to the complainant, there was a conflict of interest because the former EFSA staff member could influence EFSA's decisions for the benefit of the biotechnology company in question, which is a leading company in the genetic engineering of plants. The NGO was particularly concerned that the move took place less than two months after the former staff member in question had left EFSA, without a 'cooling off' period.

EFSA explained in its opinion that it had raised no objections to the move because the Head of Unit had not been a decision-maker as regards EFSA's provision of scientific advice. According to EFSA,

the Agency adequately assessed the information about the staff member's move and took the view that there was no conflict of interest.

After his investigation, the Ombudsman concluded that EFSA had not carried out as thorough an assessment of the alleged potential conflict of interest as it should have. He called on EFSA to improve the way it applies its rules and procedures in future 'revolving door' cases. As a general matter and unconnected to the specific case, the Ombudsman also pointed out that negotiations by a serving member of staff concerning a future job which could amount to 'revolving doors' would themselves constitute a conflict of interest. He recommended that EFSA strengthen its rules and procedures accordingly.

The Ombudsman's recommendation is available at:
<http://www.ombudsman.europa.eu/en/cases/draftrecommendation.faces/en/11089/html.bookmark>