



Corporate Europe Observatory

PRESS RELEASE

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Conflicts of interest exposed on EFSA food additives panel Was EFSA advice on aspartame influenced by industry-biased experts?

Brussels, 15 June -- New research by Corporate Europe Observatory (CEO) has identified conflicts of interest among the scientific experts advising the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) on the safety of food additives, including the controversial sweetener aspartame [1]. The research found that not only were EFSA's own rules on conflicts of interest breached in some cases, but that these rules fail to protect the public from potentially industry-biased opinions on food safety.

Four members of EFSA's ANS panel, including the chair John Christian Larsen, were found to have failed to declare collaborations with the food industry-funded think tank and lobby group, the International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI Europe). According to EFSA rules, failure to disclose "advice or services in a particular field falling within EFSA's remit" -- even if unpaid -- is considered as a "prima facie breach of trust" towards the agency and it could lead to the experts' dismissal [2].

In total, 11 members of the 20-strong panel were found to have a "conflict of interest" as defined by the OECD [3], as a result of their links to the food industry. These conflicts were allowed by EFSA's own rules, which CEO says is unacceptable. The European Court of Auditors (ECA) has recently launched a special investigation into conflict-of-interest rules at EU agencies like EFSA, focusing on the way these rules are applied but also examining whether EU agency rules match with the OECD standards.

Last month the European Commission asked EFSA to bring forward a complete review of the safety of aspartame. In February EFSA's ANS panel had dismissed concerns raised by two scientific studies linking aspartame with increased cancer rates and pre-term births [4].

CEO is calling for stricter rules on the way conflicts of interest are handled at EFSA, and in the report compares EFSA's approach to conflicts of interest with the new rules at sister agency the European Medicines Agency [5]. If these new rules, although far from perfect, were applied at EFSA, four of the experts on the ANS panel -- Ivonne Rietjens (vice-chair), Gerrit Speijers (rapporteur), Jürgen König and Sandro Grilli -- would be disqualified from sitting on the panel.

Corporate Europe Observatory campaigner Nina Holland said:

"These findings raise serious questions about the independence of the advice provided by EFSA's food additives panel. It is time EFSA overhauls the rules on conflicts of interest and ensures that the scientific advice it provides is really independent, not potentially driven by commercial interests."

The study found that:

- The Danish ANS panel chair, Larsen, failed to declare work for ILSI Europe in 2008 and 2009, breaching EFSA rules which state that the chair should not engage "in activities that may result in any potential conflict of interest" [6].
- The Dutch rapporteur for the ANS Panel Gerrit Speijers, Irish toxicologist Iona Pratt, and Austrian professor Jürgen König have also been involved in active collaboration with ILSI Europe, and did not include these activities in their declaration of interests.

Speijers also acts as a consultant to PepsiCo and Danone, and König as a consultant to Danone and dairy product manufacturer Nöm.

- The panel's Dutch vice chair, Ivonne Rietjens, receives funding from Swiss food giant Nestlé for research on food additives and flavours and has also acted as a consultant to ingredient supplier, Unimills.
- Italian professor of oncology Sandro Grilli has been a consultant for the supermarket chain Coop since 2004.
- Paul Tobback, also a panel member, is a consultant to the Belgian food industry lobby group, FEVIA, and has also served as a consultant for Carrefour and European Advisory Services, a lobby and consulting firm providing strategic advice on nutritional products.
- French panel member Dominique Parent-Massin previously worked for Coca-Cola and declared "financial links with Ajinomoto", the world's largest manufacturer of aspartame, in 2011. She was barred by EFSA from participating in discussions on aspartame.
- The report also questions the industry links of panel members John Gilbert, Jean-Charles Leblanc and Fernando Aguilar.

CEO is calling for stricter rules on conflicts of interest at EFSA that outlaw consultancy and advisory work on a paid or unpaid basis for food companies, food industry associations, and think tanks funded by the food industry.

The research and campaign group also says that EFSA should not rely on industry studies when judging the safety of food products.

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Notes:

[1] "Conflicts of interest exposed on EFSA food additives panel", Corporate Europe Observatory, 15 June 2011.

<http://www.corporateeurope.org/lobbycracy/content/2011/06/conflicts-interest-among-efsa%E2%80%99s-experts-food-additives>

[2] Guidance document on declarations of interest, EFSA, Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle, 8 September 2009. <http://www.efsa.europa.eu/en/keydocs/docs/doiguideance.pdf>

[3] The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) defines a conflict of interest as occurring "when an individual or a corporation (either private or governmental) is in a position to exploit his or their own professional or official capacity in some way for personal or corporate benefit". <http://stats.oecd.org/glossary/detail.asp?ID=7206> (The simple fact of being in such a position represents a conflict of interest, even if no unethical or improper act results).

[4] "EU requests new checks on aspartame sweetener", AFP, 25 May 2011.

<http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5ikyQ2cE6nSzlwebJX7e6xACkOrGw>

[5] European Medicines Agency policy on the handling of conflicts of interests of Scientific Committee members and experts, European Medicines Agency, 13 October 2010.

http://www.ema.europa.eu/docs/en_GB/document_library/Other/2010/10/WC500097905.pdf

[6] Procedure for identifying and handling potential conflicts of interest, EFSA, Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle, 8 September 2009.

<http://www.efsa.europa.eu/en/keydocs/docs/doiconflicts.pdf>