

Restoring faith in our daily bread

“ We will be able to eliminate guesswork in developing an EU-wide strategic approach, and jointly deploy scarce national resources to maximum effect. ”

Action is urgently needed to rebuild public confidence in Europe's food production system, and in the institutions and scientists responsible for ensuring its safety, after a series of recent 'scares'. The Commission has established a new European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) in the framework of the 2002 EU General Food Law. However, there is a growing need not just to monitor known risks, but to identify, assess and manage emerging ones. A number of Member States have launched research programmes in this area, but lack the coordination and critical mass to tackle its complex problems effectively. PERIAPT begins the process of pan-European coordination which will be needed if scarce resources are to be deployed to maximum effect in an area of increasing economic and social importance.

This is a preparatory project. The consortium will use it to look for additional partners and to define the workplan for a full Coordination Action under the ERA-NET scheme.

Recent food safety 'scares', as well as the controversy surrounding the introduction of novel foods such as those containing genetically modified organisms (GMOs), have produced public disquiet and intense debate about the adequacy of current procedures for assessing and managing food safety. Poorly informed about the benefits and risks of new foods and food production technologies, and with little insight into scientific risk assessment procedures, European citizens have lost confidence in the food industry, in its regulators, and in the scientific community which supports and defends it. At the same time the globalisation of trade, the growing complexity of food production systems, and the introduction of novel processing technologies make more likely the emergence of new and unforeseen problems with widespread effects on human or animal health, the environment or the economy.

Action is urgently needed to restore public confidence in European food production on the basis of internationally accepted strat-

egies for proactive risk assessment and management. And, since new and emerging risks in the food supply chain cannot today be confined within a single country, this action is required at European level. There is now a pressing need for a coherent and harmonised approach to the planning and management of European research programmes to develop adequate strategies and tools, based on accepted scientific principles, for the early identification and assessment of new food-related hazards. It is only through an EU-wide approach of this kind, for example, that the scientific capacity of Accession countries in particular to identify, assess and manage food safety risks can quickly be brought to the necessary level.

Early warning

The European institutions and procedures currently employed to manage food safety risks have been seriously over-stretched in recent years. So concerned was the Commission about the erosion of public confidence that it produced the White Paper on Food Safety which led to the establishment of a new European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) in the framework of the 2002 EU General Food Law. Today, however, both European and national systems remain largely 'reactive' – their mission is to monitor and manage known risks. What is needed in addition is a system capable of identifying new and unforeseen risks at an early stage, thus helping to prevent major new food safety problems.



Specific support action



“ We believe that in the long term this network will provide the European Community with a major preventive instrument. ”

Full title:

Pan-European proactive identification of emerging risks in the field of food production

Research field:

Food production

Coordinator:

Netherlands: Voedsel en Waren Autoriteit

Partners:

- Belgium: Federaal Agentschap voor de Veiligheid van de Voedselketen
- Germany: Bundesamt für Verbraucherschutz und Lebensmittelsicherheit
- Italy: Istituto Superiore della Sanità
- Poland: Instytut Żywności i Żywienia

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9 months

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PERIAPT is a preparatory action, undertaken as a Specific support action within the ERA-NET scheme. Involving senior research programme managers from the ministries and food authorities of an initial group of five Member States, it has established for the first time a forum for the interchange of information and expertise in the field of food safety risk identification. The initial group is expected to grow as additional partners are identified, and will eventually submit a joint proposal for a full follow-up ERA-NET project.

PERIAPT aims to define measures to improve the proactive identification of emerging risks as key tools for national ministries and food authorities and for the EFSA itself. It will take the first practical steps towards the mutual opening of national research resources through joint research and training activities and shared use of databases. Based on an inventory of existing research activities and an analysis of prominent gaps and weaknesses, it will develop an action plan for achieving a pan-European strategy for research in this field. This will be subjected to peer review at a major conference involving policy-makers, experts and stakeholder groups. The resulting programme of action will form the basis of the proposal for a subsequent ERA-NET.

Strength in numbers

PERIAPT's founding partners are all actively involved in the management of national research programmes on emerging food safety risks. But none on its own can hope to cover all aspects of this new, complex and multidisciplinary field. Working together offers each partner the chance to access a broader range of specialist expertise, to avoid unnecessary duplication and to achieve the critical mass necessary to tackle certain challenges effectively. Although it is concerned with the field's broad policy objectives, and not with specific scientific projects or goals, PERIAPT will nevertheless immediately add value to ongoing national research by progressively coordinating it within a coherent strategic plan.

In the longer term, the anticipated follow-up ERA-NET network aims to implement a full transnational research programme. Each country's participation might be funded nationally, or the partners may establish a common fund to finance projects selected on the basis of joint calls for proposals.

As a first step towards a system capable of providing better, more responsive and, above all, forward-looking advice to national and European food safety agencies, PERIAPT promises to renew Europe's confidence in its world-beating food industry.