2015 discharge: European Food Safety Authority (EFSA)

2016/2174(DEC) - 29/03/2017 - Committee report tabled for plenary, single reading

The Committee on Budgetary Control adopted the report by Inés AYALA SENDER (S&D, ES) on discharge in respect of the implementation of the budget of the European Food Safety Authority (ESFA) for the financial year 2015.

The committee called on the European Parliament to grant the Executive Director of the Authority discharge in respect of the implementation of the Authority's budget for the financial year 2015.

Noting that the Court of Auditors stated that it had obtained reasonable assurance that the annual accounts of the Authority for the financial year 2015 were reliable and that the underlying transactions were legal and regular, Members called on Parliament to approve the closure of the Authority's accounts. They made, however, a number of recommendations that needed to be taken into account when the discharge is granted, in addition to the general recommendations that appear in the draft resolution on performance, financial management and control of EU agencies:

- **Authority's financial statements**: Members noted that the final budget for the financial year 2015 was EUR 79 659 347. The entire budget derived from the Union budget.
- **Budget and financial management**: Members noted that the amount of unused appropriations was EUR 1 089 million. This under-execution corresponded to the unused assigned revenue (the Authority's outturn of 2014), which was reused in 2016.

Members also made a series of observations regarding procurement and recruitment procedures, as well as internal audits and controls.

As regards **conflicts of interest**, Members stressed that experts with financial interests linked to companies whose substances are evaluated by the Authority shall not be allowed to sit in the Authority's scientific panels or working groups, and that **no such expert should be appointed by the Authority before two years after his/her interests have expired**. Members stated that the Authority should be endowed with a sufficient budget to hire **independent in-house experts with no conflicts of interest**. They called on the Authority to incorporate into its new independence policy a **two-year cooling-off period** for all material interests related to the companies whose products are assessed by the Authority and to any organisations funded by them.

They regretted that the Authority has not included research funding in the list of interests to be covered by the two-year cooling-off period and called on it to swiftly implement the measure in line with the discharge authority's repeated requests. They acknowledged the fact that, since the adoption of its 2011 policy on independence, the Authority assesses and validates 100 % of the declarations of interest submitted by its experts, which on average corresponds to a grand total ranging from 6000 to 7000 declarations of interest per year. Members insisted that the Authority implement its independence policy consistently, and in particular for panel chairs and vice-chairs.

They noted that, after the matter was brought to the attention of the Authority by the discharge authority, all declarations of interest of Management Board members are now published on the Authority's website.

In addition, they noted that, pending the adoption of implementing rules on whistleblowing, the Authority implemented in January 2016 a new standard operating procedure on the **handling of requests by whistle-**

blowers facing retaliation. They called on the Authority to report to the discharge authority on the establishment and implementation of its whistleblowing rules.

Lastly, Members noted that the Authority launched in 2015 the "Transparency and Engagement in Risk Assessment" project to provide clarity regarding, and further develop approaches towards transparency and engagement in, its scientific processes. They also noted that in July 2016, the Authority's Management Board endorsed a new approach to stakeholder engagement, which enables the Authority to interact with a large range of stakeholders through a variety of channels in order to broaden outreach to representative organisations, including consumer bodies and other civil society actors in the food chain. In this respect, Members considered that the Authority should continue **paying special attention to public opinion**, and commit itself, as much as possible, to openness and transparency.