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Principles for transparency, excellence and independence in scientific advice to the European Commission

Science is a vitally important tool in government policy. In some cases science can give very definite answers, in others there is uncertainty. Recognising the wider societal questions and context when taking decisions, policymakers need to be given clear, balanced, authoritative views on the state of the science.

General policy principles

- Involve the public and, where appropriate, policy makers in shaping the questions that scientific research might address.
- Respect the role of science in the policy process: “on tap, but not on top”. There is an important position for science in advisory processes, but science on its own may be able to do little to determine the right course of action, particularly in contentious debates where there is high scientific uncertainty and/or disagreement about desired outcomes, and where societal considerations are prominent.
- Report publicly to the decision-maker. The advice and appraisal of evidence, given directly from the advisor/advisory committee to the person or people making the decision, should be made available.
- Guarantee the independence of advice and advisers from interests affecting any decisions. Experts with interests conflicting with the public interest in the advice process at stake should remain available as hearing experts but should not actively shape the advice or opinion.

- Ensure comprehensive appraisal of all data and information relevant to the issue in question, conducted in a manner which is transparent and reproducible, with clear statement of uncertainties and knowledge gaps.
- Ensure consistency between public knowledge needs and research policy.

Practical implementation

- Explicitly delineate responsibilities, role and tasks of government science advisers in any decisions or policy process, either in their own domain or when crossing into domains of others. If taking own initiative, the relationship between potential advice and policy or political processes should be fully mapped.
- Explain publicly the reasons for policy decisions, and the role of scientific advice in the formulation of those policy decisions.
- Draw on a suitably representative and diverse range of advice sources, particularly when there is disagreement about desired outcomes and/or there is high scientific uncertainty.
- Enforce strict independence policies in EU institutions in charge of risk assessment, such as agencies.
- Publish scientific advice documents and organise an open and transparent approach to the scientific appraisal process. Publish advice, analysis/appraisal and underlying evidence immediately on delivery as well as minority opinions when they exist.
- Guarantee that there is adequate public research funding available for independent risk assessment, particularly for products where there are major gaps in available knowledge on risks.

Signatories:

Helen Lynn, Alliance for Cancer Prevention, UK

Angelo Caserta, Regional Director, BirdLife Europe

Patricia Cameron, Bund für Umwelt und Naturschutz Deutschland, Germany

Paul Whaley, Scientific Policy Adviser, Cancer Prevention and Education Society, UK

David Azoulay, Centre for International Environmental Law (CIEL)

Dr Michael Warhurst, Executive Director, CHEM Trust, UK

Martin Pigeon, Corporate Europe Observatory (CEO)

Dr Lone Mikkelsen, The Danish Ecological Council, Denmark

Claire Robinson, Earth Open Source & GM Watch, UK

Christophe Morvan, Fondation Sciences Citoyennes, France

Magda Stoczkiewicz, Director, Friends of the Earth Europe

Leonore Gewessler, Global 2000 - Friends of the Earth Austria

Dr Doug Parr, Greenpeace

Génon Jensen, Executive Director, Health & Environment Alliance (HEAL)

Martin Dermine, Pesticide Action Network - Europe

Dr Christoph Then, Testbiotech, Germany

Sascha Gabizon, Executive Director, Women in Europe for a Common Future (WECF), Germany/Netherlands/France