RESOLUTION (EU) 2022/1753 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

of 4 May 2022

with observations forming an integral part of the decision on discharge in respect of the implementation of the budget of the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) for the financial year 2020

THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT,

— having regard to its decision on discharge in respect of the implementation of the budget of the European Food Safety Authority for the financial year 2020,

— having regard to Rule 100 of and Annex V to its Rules of Procedure,

— having regard to the opinion of the Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety,

— having regard to the report of the Committee on Budgetary Control (A9-0115/2022),

A. whereas, according to its statement of revenue and expenditure [1], the final budget of the European Food Safety Authority (the 'Authority') for the financial year 2020 was EUR 103 023 255,80, representing an increase of 27,60 % compared to 2019, mainly because of an increase in operating expenditure linked to the Authority; whereas the Authority's budget derives mainly from the Union budget;

B. whereas the Court of Auditors (the 'Court'), in its report on the annual accounts of the Authority for the financial year 2020 (the 'Court's report'), states that it has obtained reasonable assurance that the Authority's annual accounts are reliable and that the underlying transactions are legal and regular;

Budget and financial management

1. Notes with satisfaction that the budget monitoring efforts during the financial year 2020 resulted in a budget implementation rate of 100 %, representing a slight increase of 0,01 % compared to 2019; notes, furthermore that the payment appropriations execution rate was at 88,41 %, representing a decrease of 3,04 % compared to 2019;

Performance

2. Welcomes the contribution of the Authority to the safety of the Union food and feed chain, and its considerable efforts in providing risk managers with comprehensive, independent and up-to-date scientific advice on questions linked to the food chain, communicating clearly to the public on its outputs and the information on which they are based, and cooperating with interested parties and institutional partners to promote coherence and trust in the food safety system;

3. Highlights that, in 2020, the Authority finalised 697 questions through scientific outputs, technical reports and supporting publications; welcomes the Authority's timely support to policy-makers in providing scientific outputs following on mandates given by Parliament, mainly in the areas of animal health and welfare, bee health, welfare of rabbits, animal transport and antimicrobial resistance including external scientific and event reports;

4. Highlights the importance of a responsible, ethical and up-to-date, science-based approach to improving animal welfare; welcomes in that regard the Authority's work on the preparation of the Farm to Fork strategy;

[1] OJ C 114, 31.3.2021, p. 69.

5. Recalls that, in 2020, Parliament adopted two objections to extensions of approval periods of active ingredients used in pesticides which meet the cut-off criteria and should therefore not be authorised for use in the Union ([2]); urges the Authority to speed up its assessment of all draft review reports of active ingredients and to do all it can to speed up the reassessment process by the reporting Member States in order to avoid any new extensions of hazardous pesticides, stresses that the backlog in reassessing biocides is of particular concern as well and increased efforts are needed to resolve this;

6. Notes with satisfaction that the Authority is moving towards cutting-edge technologies, incorporating new alternative methodologies and artificial intelligence to supplement animal testing methods; recognises that the Authority along with European Chemicals Agency and European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control and five other agencies performed stress tests of their information and communications technology (ICT) systems before launching full teleworking arrangements which gave further assurance on the functioning of the ICT systems before the move to comprehensive teleworking; encourages the Authority to increase its efforts to protect animal welfare even further and to promote the use of non-animal testing methods, also in its cooperation with other institutions;

7. Welcomes the completion of the Union summary report on antimicrobial resistance in zoonotic and indicator bacteria from humans, animals and food, on which the Authority collaborated with the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control; highlights in this regard the problem of the increasing resistance of these bacteria to commonly used antibiotics;

8. Notes that the Authority uses key performance indicators (KPIs) in its comprehensive performance-based management approach to measure the added value provided by its activities, especially concerning the sharing of scientific information; notes furthermore that the Authority uses other KPIs to enhance its budget management; notes that six indicators were deleted and two were added in 2020;

9. Notes that the Authority is committed to deliver its core business and in 2020 initiated the preparations for the implementation of Regulation (EU) 2019/1381 of the European Parliament and of the Council ([3]), aiming at developing new processes, reviewing staff structure, and leveraging its technology and information management capabilities; notes also that in 2020 the Authority was able to limit the impact of the pandemic on its performance, with only a slight fall in productivity, due to the Authority's technological readiness to switch from a physical to a digital working environment early enough; further notes that in 2020 the Authority was still developing its Strategy 2027; calls on the Authority to report to the discharge authority on the developments in that regard;

([2]) European Parliament resolution of 26 November 2020 on Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 2020/1511 of 16 October 2020 amending Implementing Regulation (EU) No 540/2011 as regards the extension of the approval periods of the active substances amidosulfuron, bifenox, chlorotoluron, clofentezine, clomazone, cypermethrin, daminozide, deltamethrin, dicamba, difenoconazole, diflufenican, fenoxaprop-P, fenpropidin, fludioxonil, flufenacet, fosthiazate, indoxacarb, lenacil, MCPA, MCPB, nicosulfuron, paraffin oils, picloram, prosulfocarb, sulphur, triflusulfuron and tritosulfuron (OJ C 425, 20.10.2021, p. 87) and European Parliament resolution of 10 June 2021 on Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 2021/745 of 6 May 2021 amending Implementing Regulation (EU) No 540/2011 as regards the extension of the approval periods of the active substances aluminium ammonium sulphate, aluminium silicate, beflubutamid, benthiavalicarb, bifenazate, boscalid, calcium carbonate, captan, carbon dioxide, cymoxanil, dimethomorph, ethephon, extract from tea tree, famoxadone, fat distillation residues, fatty acids C7 to C20, flumioxazine, fluoxastrobin, flurochloridone, folpet, formetanate, gibberellic acid, gibberellins, heptamaloxyloglucan, hydrolysed proteins, iron sulphate, metazachlor, metribuzin, milbemectin, Paecilomyces lilacinus strain 251, phenmedipham, phosmet, pirimiphos-methyl, plant oils/rape seed oil, potassium hydrogen carbonate, propamocarb, prothioconazole, quartz sand, fish oil, repellents by smell of animal or plant origin/sheep fat, S-metolachlor, Straight Chain Lepidopteran Pheromones, tebuconazole and urea (OJ C 67, 8.2.2022, p. 75).

([3]) Regulation (EU) 2019/1381 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on the transparency and sustainability of the EU risk assessment in the food chain and amending Regulations (EC) No 178/2002, (EC) No 1829/2003, (EC) No 1831/2003, (EC) No 2065/2003, (EC) No 1935/2004, (EC) No 1331/2008, (EC) No 1107/2009, (EU) 2015/2283 and Directive 2001/18/EC (OJ L 231, 6.9.2019, p. 1).

10. Welcomes the efforts taken by the Authority to strengthen its collaboration with other Union agencies, notably focusing on the sharing of knowledge and best practices and looking into potential synergies through the establishment of networks in areas such as procurement planning, information and communication technologies, artificial intelligence, outward communication and human resources management; notes that the Authority has undertaken such activities with the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, the European Chemicals Agency, the European Medicines Agency, and the European Environment Agency;

11. Notes, with regard to the follow-up observations to the 2019 discharge, that the Authority strongly agrees with the objective to digitalise Union agencies; notes that, in accordance with its 2027 Strategy, the Authority aims to continue investing in the digitalisation of its processes and to modernise existing IT infrastructure, to maximise collaboration and the exchange of knowledge within and outside the Authority, thereby ensuring broader, more efficient and faster access to scientific intelligence; further notes that the Authority contributes to the Commission's digital strategy, by participating in the Health Policy Agencies and European Commission Collaboration (HPAC) initiative led by the Directorate-General for Health and Food Safety, pursuing efficiency via synergies and collaborations in the delivery of common digital solutions;

Staff policy

12. Notes that, on 31 December 2020, the establishment plan was 97,46 % implemented, with five officials and 340 temporary agents appointed out of 354 posts authorised under the Union budget (compared to 320 authorised posts in 2019); notes that, in addition, 122 contract agents and 14 seconded national experts worked for the Authority in 2020;

13. Invites the Commission to grant the Authority, in duly justified cases, the option of hiring contract agents in excess of the establishment plans, for a limited period of time and without exceeding the Authority's agreed annual budget envelope; considers that such flexibility would speed up the reduction of the cumulated backlog of work and the belated completion of ongoing dossiers owing to a lack of human resources; insists that those contract agents obviously need to comply with the Authority's independence rules;

14. Considers that it is the role of the Authority to look actively for high-level experts and convince them to take part in its work, by acknowledging the relevance and reliability of their peer-reviewed research when conducting its own scientific analysis in line with Article 8(5) of Regulation (EC) No 1107/2009 of the European Parliament and of the Council ([4]);

15. Notes the gender balance within the Authority's senior management members, with three out of five (60 %) being women; notes with concern the gender unbalance within the Authority's management board with 12 out of 15 (80 %) being men; notes the gender balance within the Authority's overall staff, with 285 out of 467 (61,03 %) being women; asks the Commission and the Member States to take the importance of ensuring gender balance into account when nominating their members to the Agency's administrative board;

16. Notes that the Authority continued its activities and was able to deliver its work programme despite the COVID-19 pandemic; notes, however, that the Authority's budget underwent changes with a decrease of commitments and payments appropriations by EUR 5 000 000 due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on missions, training, energy supplies, maintenance and the cancellation of physical meetings; notes that the Authority correspondingly experienced a decrease in revenues due to the epidemiologic situation;

([4]) Regulation (EC) No 1107/2009 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 21 October 2009 concerning the placing of plant protection products on the market and repealing Council Directives 79/117/EEC and 91/414/EEC (OJ L 309, 24.11.2009, p. 1).

17. Notes that the Authority welcomes the discharge authority's recommendation and is fully aware of the need for better geographical balance within its organisation, notably including citizens of the Member States that acceded to the Union in 2004; notes that the Authority is currently promoting a series of targeted initiatives to increase its attractiveness and improve its nationality balance; notes that the Authority is in particular focussing on increasing its visibility with the support of the Communication and Cooperation Department, the EU Agencies Network, as well as other international agencies and partner organisations; notes that the Authority is also working on a targeted dissemination of its vacancies to under-represented countries to enlarge the pool of applicants through the use of LinkedIn, job boards and the support of our national Focal Points; calls on the Authority keep the discharge authority updated on the developments in that regard;

Procurement

18. Notes that the Authority was involved in the Network of Procurement Officers (NAPO), contributing significantly to the implementation of its 2020 work programme, launching and signing seven inter-agency procurement calls in 2020, resulting in an estimated saving of EUR 2,1 million to the Union budget; notes that the Authority led seven out of nine inter-agency procedures with EUR 2,4 million estimated savings in total; welcomes the Authority's continuing collaboration with other Union agencies such as the European Chemicals Agency, the European Centre for Disease Control, the European Medicines Agency, and the European Environmental Agency to identify opportunities for joint procurement on common scientific topics; calls on the Authority to report to the discharge authority on the developments in that regard;

Prevention and management of conflicts of interest, and transparency

19. Acknowledges the Authority's existing measures and ongoing efforts to secure transparency, prevention and management of conflicts of interests, and whistleblower protection; regrets that the Authority does not publish the curriculum vitaes of its staff members online; encourages the Authority to take measures in that regard;

20. Encourages higher transparency towards stakeholders especially from the non-governmental organisation community; supports the Authority's strategic objective to further foster partnerships with other agencies, as well as with international organisations and third countries, towards an One Health Union ecosystem, while continuing its engagement with its stakeholders and the public through appropriate platforms and fora, which should result in further economies of scale;

21. Recognises the efforts of the Authority to alleviate concerns in relations to conflicts of interest of its employees; notes that conflict of interest standards can be further strengthened;

22. Notes that in 2020 the Authority identified and managed 31 conflicts of interest at the level of annual declarations of interests pertaining to external experts; notes that the Authority decided to exclude one expert from membership of the Authority's scientific group; calls on the Authority continue its efforts in identifying and managing conflicts and potential conflicts of interest and to keep the discharge authority informed;

23. Notes, with regard to the follow-up observations to the 2019 discharge on the European Ombudsman's case that the Authority is considering the development of internal procedures for preventing access to confidential information when it is notified that a member of staff is moving to another job outside the Authority after the end of service; calls on the Authority to report on the developments in that regard;

COVID-19 response and business continuity

24. Notes that the Authority continued its activities and was able to deliver its work programme despite the COVID-19 pandemic; notes, however, that the Authority's budget underwent changes with a decrease of commitments and payments appropriations by EUR 5 000 000 due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on missions, training, energy supplies, maintenance and the cancellation of physical meetings; notes that the Authority correspondingly experienced a decrease in revenues due to the epidemiologic situation;

25. Acknowledges the statement of the Authority that its governance and work programme structure remained fully operational despite the restrictions and confinement due to the COVID-19 pandemic and that the Authority continued its activities and was able to deliver its work programme; acknowledges the changes that were made to the Authority's budget, with a decrease of commitments and payments and a corresponding decrease in revenues, following a detailed SARS-COV-2 impact assessment analysis that was conducted by the Authority in cooperation with the Directorate-General for Health and Food Safety;

Internal control

26. Notes that the Authority has performed an assessment of its internal control systems for the reporting year and concluded that, overall, all internal control components and principles were present and functioning as intended; welcomes that the Authority nevertheless identified a number of measures that will be taken to further strengthen the management of sensitive information, the Authority's process architecture, the process management methodology, and risk management and internal control;

27. Notes that the internal audit service performed an audit on the assessment and adoption of scientific outputs in the food ingredients and packaging domain and in October 2020 issued its final report to the Authority; notes that the internal audit service concluded that although the process for assessing and adopting scientific outputs under the food ingredients and packaging domain is overall adequately designed, effective and efficient, one very important audit observation was issued regarding the weakness in the effective and timely implementation of the re-evaluation of food additives and enzymes;

28. Notes that in October 2020 the internal audit service started an internal audit on the Authority's procurement and grant award procedures; notes that the audit, which covers the procurement and grant award procedures finalised in the years 2019 and 2020, was published in the first semester of 2021;

Other comments

29. Notes the Authority's efforts to ensure a cost-effective and environment-friendly working place; notes the Authority's adoption of structural and plant solutions aimed at reducing energy, water consumption and CO_2 emissions;

30. Notes the Authority's efforts to use social media platforms as a primary tool to disseminate its communication material to reach stakeholders and citizens; notes that the Authority's social media activities achieved strong results, with a year-on-year increase of followers on its social media accounts of almost 30 % compared to 2019; notes that the Authority continued to implement its social science roadmap in 2020, which provides the Authority with a better understanding of citizens' risk perceptions and information needs, and in turn allows for a more targeted and impactful risk communication; further notes that the Authority continued to invest in its website and digital publications, with specific improvements delivered in 2020 that included the migration of the hosting of the Authority website to Amazon Web Services' cloud, as well as an upgrade to the Drupal 8 content management system; calls on the Authority to report on the developments on its communication strategy and digital transition;

31. Refers, for other observations of a cross-cutting nature accompanying its decision on discharge, to its resolution of 4 May 2022 ([5]) on the performance, financial management and control of the agencies.

([5]) Texts adopted, P9_TA(2022)0196.