Public Release Date: May 13, 2010

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Society for Risk Analysis

Public Participation Can Strengthen Food Risk Studies

*British Study Shows Public Participation Can Strengthen Food Risk Studies and Advice from Non-Technical Participants Can Improve Study Direction*

The inclusion of activists and members of the general public on teams of technical experts can, in some cases, beneficially expand the focus of food risk reviews, according to a new study by food experts in the United Kingdom (U.K.). The results are important to government agencies and policymakers interested in including more public input and enhancing public trust of expert recommendations on food safety.

The authors draw conclusions from three case studies related to children’s risk from pesticide residues in apples, infection from a bacterial contaminant in chicken, and a hypothetical contamination of animal feed with a toxin.

Nine researchers from universities, government agencies and research institutes collaborated on the article, “Can a participatory approach contribute to food chain risk analysis?,” which appears in the May, 2010 issue of the journal *Risk Analysis*, published by the Society for Risk Analysis. The analysts include Gary Barker of the U.K. Institute of Food Research, Andrew Hart of the Food and Environment Research Agency, and Angela Cassidy of the University of East Anglia, along with six other contributors.

The researchers conclude that technical complexities in risk reviews do not necessarily pose barriers to broader public participation and that including multiple non-technical representatives tends to broaden the focus of reviews. For example, in the risk review for a pesticide in apples, some non-technical members urged the group to consider how pesticide mixtures may have an impact on the risk, a factor not taken into account in the one-chemical-at-a-time approach previously adopted by scientists. Likewise, the non-technical participants pushed scientists to focus on how people’s behavior varies to enhance the gathering of exposure information on infection from contaminants in chicken.
But the results of the study were not one-sided. At times, adopting a broader focus became difficult for the teams when personal experiences of non-technical participants occasionally dominated the discussion of technical risk characterizations.

The authors cautioned that their results may not apply across the board, saying that it is “difficult to establish principles” based on only these three case studies. They do, however, urge “further research matching participatory processes to particular objectives,” noting the partnership between the natural and social sciences is “still in its infancy.”

*Risk Analysis: An International Journal* is published by the nonprofit Society for Risk Analysis (SRA). SRA is a multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, scholarly, international society that provides an open forum for all those who are interested in risk analysis. Risk analysis is broadly defined to include risk assessment, risk characterization, risk communication, risk management, and policy relating to risk, in the context of risks of concern to individuals, to public and private sector organizations, and to society at a local, regional, national, or global level. [www.sra.org](http://www.sra.org)

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