

Consumer Conference on the Perception of Nanotechnology in Food, Cosmetics and Consumer Products

BfR Project Description, 1 March 2006

The “Consumer Conference on Nanotechnology” was launched as a pilot project by the Federal Institute for Risk Assessment (BfR) as risk communication extends far beyond mere information on progress in scientific research and knowledge about health risks. The basis for the risk communication activities of BfR is the participatory dialogue. The staging of a consumer conference is the practical implementation of this remit by directly involving consumers in discussions of opportunities and risks prior to the widespread introduction of a consumer-related nanotechnology application. This was the first time in Germany that a public institution made use of this risk communication tool.

The consumer conference is based on the model of the consensus conference. This tool was developed and is used in Denmark. The subject and purpose of this citizen participation procedure is to assess new technologies and scientific developments from the angle of informed lay persons (citizens or consumers). The characteristic feature of these conferences is the structured public dialogue between experts and lay persons. At the “Consumer Conference on Nanotechnology” a group of 16 consumers took a critical look at the subject, nanotechnology. The goal of the multi-week opinion-forming and evaluation process was the identification of different views, estimates and expectations within the consumer group. After a public survey of experts the group put together a vote from the consumer perspective on the opportunities and risks of this technology. The consumer vote was then passed on to specific decision makers in consumer protection, politics, science, trade and industry.

Project management agency

BfR

Department: Risk Communication

Unit: Risk research, perception, early detection and impact assessment

Co-operation partners

Independent Institute for Environmental Concerns (UfU)

Institute for Ecological Economy Research (IÖW)

Project term

03/2006-01/2007

Funding agency

BfR

16 citizens of different ages and professions were randomly selected from a population of 6,000 on the basis of socio-demographic criteria for the Consumer Conference Nanotechnology. During two preparatory weekends this group took a comprehensive look at the subject, drew up questions on various consumer-relevant aspects of this technology and selected experts from science, associations, public authorities, trade and industry to answer their questions.

The final event of the “BfR Consumer Conference on Nanotechnology” was staged in Berlin from 18 to 20 November 2006. At a public hearing the invited experts responded to the

questions of the consumer group on the use of nanotechnology in food, cosmetics and textiles. Questions about the labelling of nanoproducts repeatedly triggered what was, in some cases, a heated debate. The participants demanded labelling in order to be able to decide for themselves whether they wished to purchase products manufactured using nanotechnology or not. Other important discussions points were the development of suitable analytical methods for the detection of nanoparticles, the disposal of nanoproducts and the provision of funds to carry out research into potential risks.

In a closed session the group then put together its vote on nanotechnology. It was presented to the public on 20 November 2006 and handed over to representatives of public authorities, political circles and associations. It identified the use of nanomaterials in food as the most sensitive area. The advantages that had been claimed up to now from the use of nanotechnology like, for instance, changes in the flow properties of ketchup or the flowability of bulk products were deemed to be somewhat superfluous by the consumers when set against potential risks. When it comes to the use of nanotechnology in cosmetics and textiles, the consumers were of the opinion that the already foreseeable benefits clearly outweighed the potential risks. For instance, nanoparticles in sunscreen could offer improved UV protection and help to stem the increase in skin cancer. Consumers were also of the opinion that when it comes to work, sport and daily clothing, nanotechnology could help to provide better quality of life.

The final report is available and has been published in the *BfR-Wissenschaftsreihe* 03/2008.

The publication is available on the Internet on

http://www.bfr.bund.de/cm/238/bfr_verbraucherkonferenz_nanotechnologie.pdf

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