GRACE
GMO Risk Assessment and Communication of Evidence

Minutes of the GRACE project Advisory Board (AB) inaugural meeting

JKI, Berlin, 5th June 2012

Participants:

Present: Detlef Bartsch, Yaroslav Blume, Yann Devos, Geoff Frampton, Kaja Kantorska, Annette Pöting.

Observer: Jens Hoegel (EC DG Research / E2 <<Biotechnologies>>)

Actions

Geoff Frampton was nominated by consensus as the AB chair.

Key points discussed

- The GRACE project aims to conduct numerous systematic reviews (SR). The proposed number of SR that could be completed seems very ambitious given the resource requirements for a typical well-conducted SR (which would need a multi-disciplinary review team and adequate time for the eight core steps of SR to be conducted by a minimum of 2 reviewers where necessary, as well as time and resources for peer review and dissemination).
- SR may not always be an appropriate way to synthesise the evidence. Other options could be considered, e.g. evidence mapping (also known as systematic mapping) or using a rapid review approach. The principles of evidence mapping are reasonably well established (e.g. www.evidencemap.org) but there is currently no consensus on how to do a rapid review. The potential use of rapid reviews is an emerging area (e.g. being actively discussed at present in key health research conferences).
- The roles of the databases to be developed in the GRACE project are not clear with regard to how they will link to the SR. Based on experience in health technology assessment, it could be useful to develop a library of information on completed SR on GM plants (which could also contain SR protocols and other types of evidence synthesis such as evidence maps). The Cochrane Library and Collaboration for Environmental Evidence provide models of such (relatively simple) databases. In the GRACE kick-off (KO) meeting, there appeared to be a view that a database could be set up to provide input information for SR. It should be noted that this approach has several major limitations (discussed in the KO meeting) and has not been used elsewhere in health research or environmental research.

- The objectives of the GRACE project overlap with those of EFSA and it may be beneficial to liaise with EFSA, e.g. to identify relevant sources of scientific literature and approaches for providing appropriate infrastructure to support the preparation and conduct of SR.

Action points

The AB recommends that the GRACE project consortium considers the following:

- The number of SR proposed in the GRACE project should be carefully considered in the context of available resources. It is advisable that an appropriate SR team is recruited for each SR and that the team includes an information specialist.
- The structure of support for SR within the GRACE project should be considered. For some review questions it may be possible to use the same extensive literature search to answer multiple questions, so a coordinated approach across work packages for preparing SR might be efficient. Thought needs to be given to how SR will be peer-reviewed and disseminated (published).
- The milestones and deadlines for completing the GRACE databases are ambitious, especially as the database purpose(s) may not be entirely clear at present.
- Training of GRACE participants in SR methods would be helpful. This was already discussed at the KO meeting and agreed in principle. The project leader should poll the participants on their current level of SR experience and whether they feel there is a need for training in specific areas of evidence synthesis. Some issues around the project objectives may be clearer after training. For example, when planning a SR it is helpful to be able to understand whether the proposed review question is actually suitable for SR or whether it needs to be more focused; or whether alternative approaches (e.g. mapping) should be employed. Some members of the team that provided training in SR to EFSA may be able to assist with training GRACE participants in SR methods.
- It is important that stakeholders representing different viewpoints concerning the risk assessment of GMOs are invited to participate in WP7 at an early stage. Note that SR can benefit from appointing advisors to assist with reviewing the SR protocol. It could be considered whether WP7 has a role in providing a balanced mix of stakeholders/advisers to ensure project-wide impartiality is maintained where possible.
- More time should be scheduled for the AB meetings in future, to enable project issues to be fully discussed.

WP1 and WP2 were not discussed by the AB (due to lack of time). The AB wishes to obtain more detailed information regarding these experimental projects as soon as they are available in order to be able to comment and make recommendations. Sufficient time should be reserved for this during the next AB meeting.

The AB agreed to assist with promoting the GRACE project externally as follows:

- Yann Devos will liase with EFSA Scientific Assessment Support to alert EFSA to the project and provide feedback on common interests;

- Kaja Kantorska will inform EU member states of the GRACE project (e.g. website) via regular SANCO meetings.

It was agreed that the AB will be informed of project progress and will be invited by the project leader to comment on early drafts of documents (the project leader will send a short e-mail to each AB member to advise when key project documents have been filed online).