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Commission proposes letting member states decide on GM cultivation

By Jess Halliday, 15-Jul-2010

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The European Commission has unveiled new proposals to give EU member states the right to decide whether or not to cultivate genetically-modified crops – a move that could speed up approvals but which has led to fears over market distortion.

GM foods have been consumed in the United States for the last 15 years, but their progress in Europe has been stalled by fiercely divided opinion between member states. Hungary, Austria, Germany have all faced legal challenges after banning cultivation of GM crops under a 'get-out' clause in existing legislation.

Biotech proponents have been frustrated in the length of time it takes for new GM approvals to go through the law making procedure, even after favourable safety opinions from the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA).

In March the Commission approved BASF's Amlora potato, 13 years after application was filed. Although intended for non food uses, this was significant because it was the first approval granted by the Commission since 1998.

A clutch of requests for permission to import GM crops for food and feed uses in the EU have gone through, but via a default process that comes into effect when no agreement can be reached.

Faster approvals?

In a meeting to discuss the proposals with the Environment committee, health and consumer protection Commissioner John Dalli denied an agenda to speed up further approvals. He insisted the proposals were "not a trade off" and guaranteed that there would be "no dilution" of the EU process.

Any crops proposed would still need to go through safety assessment by EFSA and EU approval, only after which would member states be able to allow, restrict or ban their cultivation at national level. This means that health and environmental reasons could not be given for a decision not to cultivate.

But Finnish MEP Satu Hassi said: "We know the proposal is intended to open up authorisations for a long list of other GM crops".

Spain's biotech industry association Asebio welcomed the move "to speed up pending authorisations", but cited a number of concerns. These include the possibility that some countries could give non-scientific reasons for restricting or banning cultivation; and the possible establishment of alternative labelling thresholds to the European ones.

It believes that labelling thresholds lower than the EU's 0.9 per cent limit could prove limiting for farmers who would like to use these crops to improve yields or combat pests, and ultimately could lead to fragmentation of the European single market.

Germany's Dagmar Roth-Behrendt welcomed the proposal as "in line with reality", since several Member States already restrict cultivation through a safeguard clause in existing EU rules. The proposal would give a sounder legal basis for this choice, argued Mr Dalli, adding that public opposition or protecting the organic farming sector would be among valid reasons that could be cited.

Concern about market distortion was shared by French MEP Françoise Grosselet, and Spain's Pilar Ayuso said that the EU could not pretend to be a "bubble" against GMOs at the cost of farmers, especially considering its large-scale importation of GM feed.

Marisa Matias from Portugal was among those fearing that decisions made on this basis may not stand up to a legal challenge, for example by the WTO. She commented: "We don't know if the guarantees are sufficient".

Debate ahead

For the change to become a reality, it will have to have the backing of both the European Parliament and the Council of Ministers.

Commissioner Dalli promised to return to the Environment committee later in the year to discuss improvements that could be made to the overall process.

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