

EC plans to relax rules on GM crops in Europe

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Procedural tweaks fail to protect public and environment

On 13 July 2010 the European Commission announced proposals to speed up the union's genetically modified (GM) crop authorisation procedure. Member states are being promised the right to ban GM cultivation if they reduce their opposition during the EU-level authorisation process.

The Commission hopes the proposal will break a decade-long deadlock [1] in the authorisation procedure, according to a leaked document [2]. It promises to formalise in law what already exists in practice – where half a dozen countries have banned GM crops [3]. The Commission tried four times to overturn these national bans, but each time failed to get the qualified majority needed in Council. Today's proposal would be the reverse of what EU environment ministers unanimously called for in 2008 - a strengthening of the authorisation procedure [4].

Greenpeace policy adviser Stefanie Hundsdorfer said: "The Commission failed four times to overturn national bans against GM crops and their poisonous agricultural model. Now president Barroso is admitting defeat by presenting a compromise deal. In an attempt to muddle through with his pro-GM agenda, he is offering countries national bans if they turn a blind eye to the health and safety concerns they have about new crops during the EU authorisation process. But individual bans cannot replace a scientifically sound EU-level safety procedure. GM contamination does not stop at national borders."

Friends of the Earth Europe food campaigner Mute Schimpf said: "While the European Commission is seemingly offering countries the right to implement national bans, in reality the proposal aims to do the opposite, opening Europe's fields to GM crops. The Commission continues to fail to protect Europe's food and feed from contamination by GM crops, and we urge countries to reject this deal as it stands. Until member states' demands for a full reassessment of the risks of GM crops are met, there should be a moratorium on authorising new GM crops."

The Commission proposal allows member states to ban GM crops on contamination grounds, an improvement on earlier drafts, but does not give member states an additional right to ban on the important environment or health grounds. It also fails to deal with the contamination caused in member states that decide to grow GM crops. The Commission's own impact assessment concluded that the proposals would lead to a "negative impact for non-GM farmers."

Hundsdorfer added: "Barroso seems to think that member states want to ban GM for political reasons and that the scientific concerns they have been raising for years are mere posturing. But their concerns are real and today's proposal will only provide the Commission with temporary relief."

A briefing document is available on request at Greenpeace EU Unit and Friends of the Earth Europe - authors of this press release. This press release is also available on: www.greenpeace.eu and www.foeeurope.org

Notes

[1] Before the antibiotic-resistant Amflora potato this March, no GM crop had been authorised for cultivation in the EU for 12 years.

[2] Draft Explanatory Memorandum, Proposal for a European Parliament and Council Regulation modifying Directive 2001/18/EC as regards the possibility for the Member States to prohibit, restrict or impede the cultivation of GMOs in their territory.

[3] Cultivation of the two genetically modified crops authorised to be commercially grown in the EU, Monsanto's GM maize Mon810 and BASF's GM potato Amflora, has been prohibited in several EU member states. The cultivation of Mon810 is banned in France, Germany, Greece, Austria, Luxembourg and Hungary, whereas the cultivation of the GM potato is prohibited in Hungary, Luxembourg and Austria.

[4] Environment ministers unanimously called on the Commission, among others, to ensure that its scientific advisory body, the European Food Safety Authority, assesses the environmental long-term effects of GM crops and the effects of GM plants on the different ecosystems in the EU and that systematic and independent research on GM risks is conducted. See: Council of the European Union 2008: Council Conclusions on Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs), 2912th Environment Council meeting, Brussels, 4 December 2008. See Greenpeace's highlights of the original Council Conclusions 2008, available on request.