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News | 26.12.2011

GMO (In)Digest

Issue 1 of the GMO Campaign Newsletter



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EU Work

Honey

The European Commission seems unsure about how to proceed after the ECJ decision that pollen and honey contaminated with MON810 are illegal (Case C-442/09).

It has met with EFSA and Monsanto to consider what steps would be necessary for the company to get a specific authorization for use of MON810 GE maize in pollen. To our knowledge, Monsanto has not yet lodged a demand for it. We consider that it cannot be just an addendum to the current demand for renewal of MON810 authorization, but it has to be a specific dossier with a full health and environmental impact assessment. This is a prerequisite, as it has been more than 15 years that the issues of honey contamination

and effects of GE pollen on honeybees' health have been ignored.

Unaf and 17 French NGOs and honey producers organisations have initiated a petition to ask the Commission to be protected from genetic contamination. The petition has been filed with the Petition Committee of the EP on 15th December. More than 20 000 signatures have already been collected now. If you haven't done so, it is the time to sign it. And spread it, too. Italian, Netherland and perhaps Austrian beekeepers want to translate it.

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On the other hand, honey producers from GMOs countries also feel negative consequences of the ECJ decision. Although the Commission is still asking Member States not to react to the ECJ decision, we've heard that honey importers from Germany and France are asking honey producers in exporting countries (Argentina, Chile, Mexico) to test their products for the presence of GMOs, incurring new cost and uncertainty for the producers. They have required that they can continue selling their honey to Europe, as they are not responsible for GMO crops and cannot control their bees.

Meanwhile, there are probably GE contaminated honey and pollen on sale in EU shops. We are going to ask the Commission what it intends to do about illegal sales of honey and pollen.

GMO legislation

Two independent [reports](#) evaluating the European Union's legislation on Genetically Modified Organisms conclude that the legislation's objectives are legitimate, but improvements are needed in its implementation. "These reports confirm that the problems of implementation of the GMO legislation do not stem from its design or its objectives, which remain relevant, but rather from the way these sensitive issues are handled at a political level", Health and Consumer Policy Commissioner John Dalli said.

The current balance of opinions on GMOs in the EP and in the Commission would make it difficult to open the overall legislative framework on GMOs and substantially improve it, but it is absolutely crucial to strengthen its implementation, particularly in the field of independent long term risk assessments, functioning and independence of the European Food and Safety Authority (EFSA), inclusion of socio-economic impacts, before any GMO authorization for growing can be considered.

Cases of poor implementation are numerous. For example, the EU Ombudsman has recently found against EFSA in a conflict of interest case, involving Suzy Renckens, former head of the risk assessment of GE plants unit at EFSA before taking the position of regional manager for biotechnology regulatory affairs at biotech giant, Syngenta, two months after leaving her post at the EU agency. The Ombudsman concluded that EFSA should strengthen its rules and procedures with regard to negotiations by serving staff members concerning future jobs of the 'revolving doors' type and that it should acknowledge that it failed to observe the relevant procedural rules and to carry out a sufficiently thorough assessment of the potential conflict of interest arising from the move of a former member of its staff to a biotechnology company.

Bart Staes has asked the Commission a written question about the consequences of the ombudsman's report for EFSA's credibility.

On 18th November 2011 EFSA published an update of its [opinion](#) on the GM maize 1507. The Panel on Genetically Modified Organisms concludes that maize 1507 (Pioneer) is unlikely to raise a safety concern for the environment as long as appropriate management measures are implemented during cultivation. It recommends measures to address possible resistance in target pests to the insecticidal protein found in maize 1507 and to reduce the risk of exposure to the plant's pollen for certain highly sensitive species of

non-target butterflies and moths. [...] The Panel recognised the need to update its previous scientific opinions in light of recent advances in methodology and new scientific literature and thus initiated a reassessment of its environmental safety. In other words, there will most probably be problems of insect resistance to this Bt maize (as it has happened already in Porto Rico), but let's give it a positive opinion anyway!

The GM maize 1507 has already been voted on in the Standing Committee (no qualified majority in favour, neither against), and needs only a vote in Council before the Commission can authorise it (as it is still going through the old comitology procedure). Now that EFSA's updated opinion has been published, it is becoming more likely that the Commission proceeds with this application.

Science

A [study](#) published in September in *Cell Research* reports the surprising finding that exogenous plant microRNAs are present in the sera and tissues of various animals and that these exogenous plant miRNAs are primarily acquired orally, through food intake. One miRNA in particular, MIR168a, which is highly enriched in rice, was found to inhibit a protein that helps remove low-density lipoprotein from the blood, suggesting that microRNAs can influence gene expression across kingdoms. These findings demonstrate that exogenous plant miRNAs in food can regulate the expression of target genes in mammals.

The totally surprising finding of the study in question is that miRNA molecules are not destroyed during digestion, and, even more unexpectedly, can enter intact into the body of the animal that has eaten it, find an mRNA target (in this case in the liver) and interfere with (destroy/knock-down) its function. miRNA and siRNA molecules in a crop can inadvertently switch off (knock-down) expression of a gene system in the animal or human who has eaten it, resulting in health consequences. This should urgently lead to investigations about potential interactions between genetically modified plants and animal and human genetic systems.

José Bové and Sandrine Bélier have asked the Commission a written question on how the Commission intends to take into account the surprising and far-reaching results of this scientific study in the assessment process for GE crops.

MS/EU news

France

Unsurprisingly, the French Conseil d'Etat has followed the ECJ decision that the French ban on MON810 is illegal and cancelled the 2 French arrêtés that prohibited the growing of this GE maize variety. This means that today it is legal to grow MON810 maize in France. However, the French government has reacted immediately to the Conseil d'Etat ruling and committed to enact a new ban before the next growing season and has warned maize growers and seed companies against buying or selling GE seeds. The difficulty is in finding the right legal ground to prohibit it, in order for any interdiction not to be challenged again. France being the main maize growing country in the EU and together with Germany, a stumbling barrier against massive invasion of EU fields by GE crops, losing the ban on MON810 maize would have a very negative impact of maintaining Europe as a mainly GE-free continent.

Hungary joins the Alps-Adriatic GMO-free region

On 13th October, [Parliament passed a resolution](#) requesting that local governments ban the use of genetically modified organisms in agriculture and farming within their areas of administration. The adoption of the proposal means that Hungary has joined the Croatian initiative, put forward as part of the Alps-Adriatic cooperation, that bans the use of "polluted" crops and is aimed at keeping the region free of GMOs.

Serbia

The Greens of Serbia representatives [submitted a petition](#) to the Serbian parliament, requesting ban of genetically modified food. They also submitted a draft law banning genetically modified organisms. "With the petition, which was signed by more than 35,000 citizens, the Greens of Serbia request that the state support the ban of production, import, use and sale of GMO," Greens of Serbia leader Ivan Karić told reporters. According to Karić, the existing law on GMO is not being implemented at all and there are no by-laws, which leaves the door wide open for the genetically modified products.

Around the World

Switzerland: Modified plants found outside laboratories

Spot checks conducted in 2011 found "[isolated examples](#)" of genetically modified plants near research laboratories and a station in different places in Switzerland.

Genetically Modified plants of thale cress (*Arabidopsis thaliana*) have been found near laboratories belonging to the universities of Lausanne, Basel and Zurich. *Arabidopsis thaliana* is one of the model plants used in molecular biology. The universities were informed and asked to discover how the plants got out and the Federal Environment Office said that the plants had been dug up immediately, and there had been no contamination.

A not yet published [investigation](#) has found genetically modified rape at the train station in Lugano. According to the investigators, the population has developed after 2001 and has probably been introduced through the accidental discharge of GE contaminated seeds from freight trains on the North-South lines. GE oilseed rape is forbidden in Switzerland and in the EU, because it has a high power of dissemination. It can also cross with other "railway" plants, such as brown mustard (*Brassica juncea*) or wild radish (*Raphanus raphanistrum*). The trait that has been found in the rape is Monsanto "GT73", which makes the rape tolerant to its famous herbicide, Round-up. The canton was asked to discover where the contamination came from.

Peru

Last November, Peru's Congress [announced](#) that it overwhelmingly approved a 10-year moratorium on imports of genetically modified organisms in order to safeguard the country's biodiversity. The measure bars GMOs - including seeds, livestock, and fish - from being imported for cultivation or to be raised locally.

The bill now goes to President Ollanta Humala to be signed into law. Humala, who has been in power since late July, has repeatedly said he opposes GM programs.

The country's leading group representing farmers and ranchers, the National Agrarian Convention, said

that by this measure Peru “defends its biodiversity, its agriculture, its gastronomy and its health.”

Earlier this year, the administration of the outgoing Peruvian President slipped in a decree that opened the door for GM foods and seeds. But the subsequent outcry forced not only the resignation of the Agriculture Minister who'd introduced the decree but also contributed to the 10-year ban on GMOs.

Recommended

Press release

Bert Christiaens

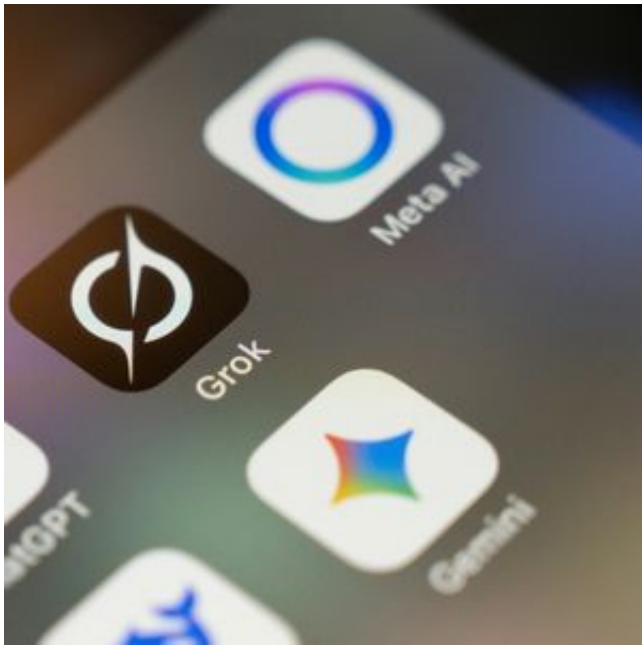


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Responsible MEPs



José Bové

Member



Bart Staes

Member

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