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News | 30.10.2012

GMO (In)Digest

Issue 7 of the GMO Campaign Newsletter

EU Work:

Conference: How GMO-free labelling of food products can contribute to increase GMO-free supplies for animal feed.

Under the sponsorship of MEPs José Bové, Jill Evans and Bart Staes, the Greens/EFA group at the European Parliament is organizing this conference on **6th December**, from 9h30 to 13h, Room A1G3. Save the date!

The conference will look at whether voluntary GMO-free labelling of food products can contribute to increase GMO-free supplies for animal feed, and under which conditions.

In the last few years, some Member States (Austria, France, Germany) have taken legislative steps to allow for GMO-free labelling, and some companies have begun labelling animal products.

During the conference, we will share GMO-free producers' experiences, technical difficulties and results. We will also discuss the different EU laws on GMO-free labelling and look at the ways to speed up adoption of meaningful GMO-free labels in all EU countries.

- Click here for online registration

New study questions safety of GMOs for human and animal health

A new scientific paper in the peer reviewed Food and Chemical Toxicology journal *"Long term toxicity of a Roundup herbicide and a Roundup-tolerant genetically modified maize",* by Séralini et al details a number of disturbing health findings that show how poorly the safety of GMOs is evaluated before they are placed on the market. See our post.

The Greens / EFA group has immediately tabled an Oral Question to the Commission on the measures it will take in response to the article to insure EU citizens' health is not put at risk with the actual authorisation process. The OQ did not gather the majority at the Conference of the Presidents to be put on the agenda of the October Plenary session. As Commissioner Dalli has resigned in the meantime, the decision to ask for a roll call vote in the Plenary as been postponed.

The study has provoked an immediate and vociferous concerted counter-attack from scientists linked to the biotech industry or involved in the authorisation of GMOs. It is symptomatic that the details of the critics as well as the level of scrutiny have never been applied to the industry non peer-reviewed studies on which the same scientists have based their favourable opinions on all GMOs that they had to assess.

National food safety agencies, in the EU and beyond, and EFSA have been asked to analyze the scientific quality of the article. The first opinions are generally very negative. This is not surprising given that most of these agencies have been involved in the GMO authorisation process. Giving any value to the article would mean dismissing their own assessment. EFSA itself in its preliminary opinion refutes the scientific quality of the article, does not question its own previous assessments, and does not even call for longer term assessments to be realised. See our post. The opinions of both French agencies ANSES and HCB, published on 22nd October are also very critical of Séralini et al's study, but highlight the need for long term independent studies.

On the other hand, there is growing support to Séralini from the scientific community.

The Greens have asked for long term studies on the effects of GMO food for many years and hope that the debate around the Séralini et al's article would at least mandate the EU authorities to impose them. The protocols for such studies would have to be designed by a panel of scientists, some of them known for their position in favour of GMOs and other known for their anti-GMO views. In the meantime, the EU needs to ban cultivation and imports of GMOs. And of course, the scientific approach cannot be considered as the unique criterion for a GMO authorisation, and the usefulness of GMOs for EU citizens must also be taken into account.

EFSA

EFSA's discharge, which had been postponed for the 1st time in its 10 years history last May (See GMO (In)digest 5), has been granted in the EP Plenary on 23rd October. The rapporteur, EPP (Conservative) MEP Macovei has received assurances from EFSA that it has and is working on a major overhaul of its conflict of interest policies and some other sectors where the first reports in April criticised it.

The Greens/EFA group finds it absolutely necessary to have a strong independent EU safety agency and voted in favor of granting the 2010 discharge. It thinks the signal that was sent in postponing the discharge may lead to a major shift in policies in the agency. Still, outstanding issues remain. We believe that the conflicts of interest that we have denounced many times and that a recent report from the European Court of Auditors pointed out invalidate the risk assessment guidelines for GMOs, as well as the safety assessments of individual GMOs. So far, even though EFSA has claimed it has improved its policy on conflicts of interest (and it has somewhat), it is not questionning its past work on risk assessments guidelines and systematic positive opinions on all GMO dossiers. The progress that we expect to be made on the quality, independence and credibility of EFSA's scientific expertise will guide us when we shall vote on the 2011 discharge. The process begins already in November.

EFSA is celebrating its 10th anniversary with a joint conference with DG SANCO to review the Authority's main achievements over the past decade and to look ahead to the challenges that it faces in the future, on 13th November. Green MEP José Bové has been invited to attend the conference and will bring

our message to the heart of the agency. On the day before, from 16h to 19h30, NGOs are holding a citizens' conference on the governance of EFSA and the science and expertise needed to protect public health and the environment. The event is at Aula Magna Economy Faculty of the University of Parma. José Bové is also a panellist at the NGOs forum.

MIR 162 authorised

While there is renewed controversy about the safety of GMOs, the Commission continues its business as usual approach in allowing new GMOs on the market. After its proposal to allow GMO maize MIR 162 from Syngenta failed to reach a qualified majority in the Standing Committee on the Food Chain and Animal Health (SCFCAH) on 10th September and in the Appeal Committee on 26th September, the Commission authorised MIR 162 on 18thOctober. It is particularly shocking because the new comitology procedure, which excludes the ministers from the decision and sets up an obscure Appeal Committee instead, does not require that the Commission adopts its proposal in case no decision has been reached in the Appeal Committee. Just in the aftermath of the resignation of DG SANCO Commissioner, the rush to authorise new GMOs will surely not contribute to EU citizens' trust in GMOs, nor in the EU institutions.

Honey

See (GMO (In)digest 1)

Following a decision from the European Court of Justice (ECJ) from 6th September, 2011 that honey contaminated with GMO maize MON810 could not legally be sold, and faced with legal and commercial problems related to such honey from GMO growing countries (as Spain in the EU, or third countries such as Argentina), the EU Commission is now proposing to amend Directive 2001/110/EC related to honey, supposedly to clarify the true nature of pollen: the proposal defines pollen as a natural constituent of honey and not as an ingredient, contrary to what the Court had decided. This proposal looks like a solution from the Commission to circumvent the decision of the ECJ and to allow selling GMO-contaminated honey without consumers knowing it. It would also avoid seeking a solution to the thorny issue of the protection of beekeepers against GMO contamination. See our post.

During the 1st European Beekeeping Congress held in Agen, Fance, from 11th to 14th October, beekeepers expressed their concern against any change in the regulation that could lead to allowing the selling of honey containing GMO-contaminated pollen without labelling and would let consumers think honey is not a 100 % natural product.

Meanwhile, the highest administrative court of lower Saxony just forced the German government to settle a case with the beekeepers involving GMO research plots. In particular the court relied on the ruling of the ECJ. The German government was reprimanded by the judges for not having taken beekeeping into account when creating the legal framework for GMOs in Germany.

LLP

Green MEP Martin Hausling wrote again to the Commission about his and José Bové's Question for written answer to the Commission from 9th July about low-level presence (LLP) of non-approved GMOs. Indeed, the Commission has replied on 31st August that it is currently in the process of reviewing the data submitted by Member States under the reporting obligations and will report back once the data has been analysed.

7th European GMO Free Regions Conference

200 participants from 33 countries attended the 7th European GMO Free Regions Conference in Brussels on 4th and 5th September. Key issues on the agenda were the still-unresolved question of national bans for the cultivation of GMO crops and GMOs risk assessments, with a controversial debate with EFSA's executive Director Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle on the performance of her agency, ten years after its foundation. Participants agreed that the challenges ahead, including new GMO approvals and attempts to undermine GMO-free standards with dubious thresholds for low-level presence of GMOs in feed, food and even seeds will require concerted action. Watch the recorded live stream of the conference. See the workshops presentations.

MS/EU news:

Italy

Italian ban on MON810 declared unlawful

On 6th September, the European Court of Justice (ECJ) concluded that the Italian prohibition of growing GMO maize 810 was illegal. Italy does not have a ban on MON810 like the other Member States that enacted a ban on this cotroversial maize, but has refused to review the dossier from Pioneer on the grounds that the country did not have a coexistence law. The Court considers: that the cultivation of GMOs such as MON810 maize cannot be made subject to a national authorisation procedure when the use and marketing of those varieties are authorised and those varieties have been accepted for inclusion in the common catalogue; and that Article 26a of Directive 2001/18/EC does not entitle a Member State to prohibit the cultivation on its territory of GMOs pending the adoption of coexistence measures to avoid their unintended presence in other crops. Even though the legal grounds are different, it is yet another national ban that has been declared unlawful, when the Commission proposal on national bans seems to have disappeared from the Council's radar!

Arond the world:

Russia

Russia bans imports of GMO maize after Pr. Séralini's study

Russia's National Union of Protection of the Rights of Consumers, Rospotrebnadzor has suspended the import of GMO maize to Russia. Due to the potential health impacts of GMO maize that the Séralini et al's article reveal, Russia's chief sanitary doctor, Gennady Onishchenko ordered a ban on the import of GMO maize until all the circumstances are clarified. According to a 2011 poll made by Rospotrebnadzor in 2011, 81% of Russians defined their assessment of GMOs as "generally negative". Other countries may follow Russia in what could generate new tensions on the acceptance of GMOs. The Greens/EFA group believes the EU should also immediately ban the imports of this GMO.

Biosafety Protocol

The 6th Meeting of the Parties to the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety was held in Hyderabad, India from 1st to 5th October. One of the outcomes of the meeting was an agreement to advance discussions to clarify socioeconomic issues associated with living modified organism (LMOs). A group of 40 experts, including scientists, economists and social scientists, will be convened to further clarify the issue of socioeconomic considerations. But there was no progress on the tough issue of liability.

The meeting was followed by the 11th Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity from 8th to 19th October, where the EU Commission presented its Proposal for a draft Regulation that will implement the Nagoya Protocol on Access to Genetic Resources and Benefit-sharing and allow the EU to ratify it and formally become a Party. The proposal will now be considered by the European Parliament and the Council. Green MEP Sandrine Bélier has been appointed Rapporteur for the EP.

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Opinion

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