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GMO (In)Digest

Issue 8 of the GMO Campaign Newsletter

EU Work:

The Greens/EFA GMO campaign is now on twitter. Follow it @GMOFreeEU

And of course you should also be following our other campaigns on twitter at: @greens_climate (climate campaign) @FoodRevEU (food campaign)

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

The conference has shown that the issue of GMO-free labelling has gained a lot of importance and momentum. There is a wide diversity of initiatives, actors, practices and rules that are being taken and need now to be promoted and harmonised in order to allow EU wide distribution and recognition of GMO-free products.

It is clear that information on whether animals are GMO fed or not is a legitimate and strong demand from consumers and that GMO-free labelling initiatives are possible and increasing, leading to practical national regulations allowing for meaningful labelling. However, there is now a pressing need for an EU-wide regulation on GMO-free labelling in order to avoid unfair competition within Europe and allow intra-EU GMO-free clear and workable labels. The Greens/EFA group will press the Commission to come up with a practical proposal for a regulation in its current mandate and will campaign with citizens' group all over Europe to make GMO-free products recognisable.

- Event page with programme, presentations and recorded livestream

EFSA

See (GMO (In)digest 7)

On 13th November, 2012, EFSA celebrated 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,. Green MEP José Bové, invited to attend the conference, has insisted on the need for a strong EFSA in the EU, and further efforts to be made to prevent conflicts of interest within the agency and promote independent scientific expertise. On the day before, NGOs had held a citizens' conference on the governance of EFSA and the science and expertise needed to protect public health and the environment. This event, which some EFSA staff attended, has led to a first meeting between EFSA and NGOs to address issues of concern, such as prevention of conflicts of interest, evidence and data used in risk assessment, scientific processes and methodologies, scientific expertise, science versus other legitimate concerns, transparency and accountability, in Brussels on 30th January. An important dialogue is under way between EFSA and civil society.

The EP voted in favour of EFSA's 2011 budget discharge on 16th April, despite the Greens/EFA group's demand for postponement. Last year for the 1st time in its 10 year history, the 2010 discharge had been postponed partly because of blatant conflicts of interest among some scientists on the scientific panels and International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI) undue influence on the agency. The Committee for Budgetary Control (Cocobu) had suggested approving the discharge, with some good wording coming from Green MEPs Bart Staes' amendments about the need to prevent conflicts of interests. But conflicts of interest seem still present in EFSA despite the introduction of its new independence policy last year, according to EPP shadow rapporteur Petri Sarvamaa. He said that several experts on EFSA's working group on GM insects had links with Oxitec, the company which wanted to market GM mosquitoes.

Following the pitiful resignation of ILSI-envoy Ms Banati, the Commission has short-listed 11 candidates to fill the open place in the management board of EFSA. The list is surprisingly more open than usual, with more free-thinking experts, and there were some potentially good candidates. The EP will give its opinion in the coming days, but it is the Council who will finally appoint the new member.

In line with its stated policy of transparency, EFSA has opened its 81st GMO scientific panel meeting to observers. The Greens/EFA GMO advisor, Arnaud Apoteker, has registered and attended the meeting which adopted 2 scientific opinions against Austrian safeguard clauses against imports of GMO oilseed rape and a guidance document for environmental risk assessment of GMO animals, among other issues. The adoption of the guidance document has been slammed by the UK NGO Genewatch.

Honey

See (GMO (In)digest 7)

The European Commission is 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 the selling of GMO-contaminated honey without the 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.

The Commission did not consider it useful to conduct an Impact Assessment before presenting the proposal, as it wants to expedite it as quickly as possible and considers it as a purely technical issue. However, beekeepers have expressed their concern against changes in the honey directive that could lead to allowing the selling of honey containing GMO-contaminated pollen without labelling. They fear that the proposed changes would also lead to consumers thinking honey is not a 100 % natural product.

The proposal is currently being discussed both in the EP and in the Council. Whereas the EP rapporteur,

ECR MEP Julie Girling, supports the proposal, shadow rapporteurs from three political groups (including Greens/EFA shadow Bart Staes) have ensured that there will be an Impact Assessment by the EP services.

But the pressure to come up with a proposal that would nullify the ECJ's decision as quickly as possible is mounting: The US has made clear that the ruling is problematic to them in the framework of the soon-to-be-negotiated free trade agreement between the US and the EU (TIPP). And the Committee on Agriculture is now claiming it should be the lead committee.

Health Commissioner Tonio Borg has urged MEPs not to turn this proposal into a big debate on GMOs but to speedily reach a conclusion. We consider the opposite, that this proposal will have far reaching implications for beekeepers, bees, and consumers that need to be fully assessed before the Commission decides on turning down a court decision.

Food and Feed Risk Assessment of GMOs

The new guidelines for Food and Feed Risk Assessment of GMOs have been adopted as an implementing regulation by the SCoFCAH on 25th February. It will be implemented 20 days after publication in the official journal. Although it may be considered as an improvement from the present situation because the regulation makes 90-days rat toxicological testing mandatory for all single event GMOs, it is still utterly far from satisfactory. First, 90 days toxicological studies look like a farce at a time when a new scientific study casts new doubts on the safety of GMOs on a longer term and at the minimum has shed light on the fact that it is the only such long term study that exists. As a result, national governments and the Commission are indeed now thinking of carrying out such studies, according to EU Food Policy. Also, only single events will be tested. The guidelines consider that stacked-genes GMOs do not need this toxicological assessment, but most of the future GMOs will be stacked genes and consequently won't be subject to mandatory toxicological studies.

The regulation says that GMOs already in the pipeline of the authorisation process, and the ones submitted within 6 months of the implementation of the regulation will not be subject to these guidelines. This means that the Commission will be able to authorise something like 50 GMOs that have been assessed by a process it has found to be insufficient. This is ridiculous and has to be opposed by all means. Concerned that the Commission may be tempted to use the adoption of the regulation to speed up new authorisations for growing GMO crops, Friends of the Earth Europe and Corporate Europe Observatory (CEO) have jointly launched a campaign and collaborative tools for campaigning against GMO crops: Stop the crop

Member State/EU news:

Poland - Ban on MON810 and Amflora potato

Following the controversial changes in its seed law adopted in November 2012 to make it "euro-compatible", the Polish government has adopted on 3rd January regulations that prohibit cultivation of GMO maize MON810 and GMO Amflora potato on its territory. These are the only 2 GMOs that are allowed for cultivation in the EU. By effectively banning the cultivation of these GMOs, the government has complied with the promise it made when it amended the Seed Act and lifted the general ban on GMOs that was illegal in the EU.
The bans are justified by the impossibility of coexistence with non-GMO crops in Poland and the threat of contamination of honey by pollen of maize MON 810 and the lack of independent studies on environmental and health safety, according to Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Mr Stanisław Kalemba.

It is now high time the Commission realises that it cannot continue trying to force countries to accept GMOs.

Italy- Emergency measure against MON810

The Italian government has asked the Commission to suspend the authorisation of the cultivation of GMO maize MON810 in Italy and all other EU countries and to proceed urgently with a new safety assessment. It is also asking that the Commission provides appropriate mandatory management measures for GMO users in order to prevent contamination. In accordance with Art. 34 of EU Reg. 1829/2003, Italy provided new scientific data from a recent scientific report by the *Italian Agricultural Research Council* (CRA) about the potential risks from this insecticide producing GMO maize and called for an emergency measure, i.e. a national ban. Italy will become the 8th country to ban the only GMO maize that is allowed in the EU, after Austria, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Luxembourg and Poland. For the Minister of Agriculture Policy, Mr. Mario Catania, this measure will help safeguarding the identity and specific regional qualities that are at the core of Italian agriculture and food successes.

Around the world:

USA - Monsanto protection act

It was a hidden amendment that slipped into the Agricultural Appropriations Bill (Section 735), which passed through Congress last March without many members knowing about it, but it means a lot for agri-biotech companies and has provoked an understandable fury amongst environmentalists. Indeed, this provision prevents the US justice system from opposing the growing of GMO crops, even if they haven't received an approval. It has been dubbed the "Monsanto protection act" by NGOs and it protects companies from litigation in the face of health risks. Despite the outcry, Obama has signed the bill, paving the way for unrestricted growing of GMO crops in the US with all the impacts that go together and are on the rise. See (GMO (In)digest 5)

Senate Appropriations Committee chairman, Sen. Barbara Mikulski, D-Md, usually known for being in favour of labelling GMOs in food (which is rare in the USA), has been blamed by NGOs for having apparently been unaware that the "Monsanto Protection Act" even existed within the spending bill, HR 933 and having voted blindly only to avert a government shutdown. The Senator communicated later that she understands the anger over this provision, but that she didn't put the language in the bill and doesn't support it either. But this came too late, unfortunately.

More concentration in the US GMO seed market

Monsanto has reached cross-licensing pacts with its main giant competitors in the global GMO seed market. After having announced a cross-licensing deal with Dow Agrosciences, Monsanto recently reached another one with Bayer that will allow the exchange of specific GMO traits between them. The biotech industry strengthens its grip on the US seed market and food supply to a chilling level.

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Responsible MEPs

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