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News | 25.09.2013

GMO (In)Digest

Issue 10 of the GMO Campaign Newsletter



EU Work:

No Qualified Majority in Appeal Committee on GMO imports:

After failing to reach a qualified majority at standing committee on food chain and animal health on 10th June, the Commission proposal to authorise the infamous Smartstax GMO maize (producing 6 different insecticide toxins and withstanding 2 herbicides) and 8 other stacked genes GMO varieties failed again in the Appeal Committee on 11th July. Belgium, Denmark, Czech Republic, Estonia, Ireland, Spain, Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Finland, Sweden & UK voted in favour of the authorisation, Greece, France, Cyprus, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Hungary, Malta, Austria, Poland, Slovenia & Croatia voted against while Bulgaria, Germany & Italy abstained. However, there was no Qualified Majority either to reject the proposal and the Commission is now free to grant EU marketing approval, but also can and should decide to withdraw its proposal. The Greens/EFA group has called on Commissioner Borg not to proceed with allowing these first and controversial stacked genes GMOs on the EU market. No Qualified Majority was reached either for or against the approval of pollen from MON810 GMO maize, a proposal responding to a Court of Justice ruling in September 2011 that concluded that honey containing traces of pollen from GMO crops cannot be marketed in the EU without prior authorisation. See (GMO (In)digest 8)

Honey

See (GMO (In)digest 8) The European Commission is proposing to modify the honey directive to define pollen as a natural constituent of honey rather than an ingredient, as was decided by the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU), to allow the selling of GMO-contaminated honey without the consumers knowing it. Thanks to the Greens/EFA shadow rapporteur, Bart Staes, an impact assessment to identify the most important economic, social and environmental impacts of the proposed change has been required by the ENVI Committee. The assessment concluded that such a change in the status of pollen in honey would increase honey imports to countries in the European Union (EU) from non-EU countries and may facilitate the cultivation of GMO crops insofar that beekeepers will face less restrictions in locating their hives nearby GMO fields. For the Greens/EFA group, such a change would benefit GMO growers at the expense of honey producers and consumers. It makes a mockery of the spirit of the GMO labelling regulation (Reg. 1829/2003) and of the EU court decision. The group has proposed amendments to the Commission proposal to make sure that beekeepers and honey producers keep the same rights to be protected from GMO contamination as all other farmers and that consumers are informed about GMO traces in honey. The ENVI Committee report will be voted on 27th November.

EFSA

See (GMO (In)digest 9)

Unable to conclude on GMO maize application

The *European Food Safety Authority* (EFSA) has been unable to reach a conclusion on GMO maize 3272 application by *Syngenta* due to "insufficient data". The scientific opinion, published on 21 August 2013, said Syngenta had "failed to provide key information to allow a full risk assessment to take place of GM maize". Maize 3272 has been genetically modified for use in the production of ethanol. It expresses a thermotolerant alpha-amylase which would eliminate the need to add microbially produced enzyme to catalyse the hydrolysis of starch. Although not intended for food or feed uses, it is unavoidable that some GMO maize 3272 would end up in the food chain. It is the second time in a few months that EFSA has not given a positive opinion on a GMO after years of systematic positive opinions. Is it that the companies make less and less scientific assessment of their products, or is EFSA becoming somehow less lenient on the scientific quality of the dossiers?

Director leaves

Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle, Executive Director of EFSA since July 2006, announced on 24th July that she was resigning to take up the position of Director General for agricultural, agri-food and territorial policies in the French Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Forestry. Bernhard Url, responsible for EFSA's Risk Assessment and Scientific Assistance Directorate has been designated as deputising and will lead the organisation until the Management Board appoints an *ad interim* Executive Director at its October meeting. In the meantime, the European Commission will initiate the process for recruitment of a new permanent Executive Director, a process that should take between 9 and 12 months. For many years, the Greens/EFA group has criticised the conflicts of interest and undue industry influence at EFSA, in the management board as well as in scientific panels, such as the GMO panel. This has led to an internal process lead by the EFSA director to reduce them, as well as increase transparency. Still, these efforts have fallen short of questioning previous risk assessments of GMOs, and more importantly, the risk assessment methodology and concepts that had been written under heavy industry influence. We hope the new director will take the needed bold steps to cut links with industry in order for EFSA to regain legitimacy and credibility in its scientific opinions. In this regard, the appointment of Ms Kleiner as Director of Science Strategy and Coordination (SCISTRAT) has raised concern in NGOs. Indeed, according to PAN-Europe, Ms. Kleiner used to work for industry lobby group ILSI (International Life Sciences Institute) for over 7 years and defended a long range of industry positions and industry tools. Since she joined EFSA, she has been promoting industry views on food safety and has worked with biased scientists, some of which have been recently removed because of conflicts of interests. EFSA is also looking for an Environmental Risk

Assessment Team Leader in the GMO unit who is going to coordinate and support the work of the GMO Panel and its Working Groups dealing with mandates on environmental safety of GMOs. This is another position that needs to be kept at a distance from industry influence. No doubt that these sensitive issues will be discussed at the next stakeholders' conference on Transparency in Risk Assessment on 3rd October 2013 in Parma. http://www.efsa.europa.eu/en/events/event/131003.htm

Is Monsanto dropping the EU?

Monsanto announced that the company would stop pushing for expansion of genetically modified crops and not seek any new approvals for genetically modified plants in Europe. The decision would cover five EU approval requests to grow genetically modified maize, plus one soybean and one sugar beet that are in the "pipeline". The Commission has confirmed late August that Monsanto had informed it of its intention to withdraw the applications. The Greens/EFA group is delighted that some GMO plants will not be grown in Europe and considers that this announcement from Monsanto, after similar moves from other biotech companies, is an acknowledgement of EU citizens' deep and long-lasting opposition to GMOs. See our post (in French) http://gmo.greens-efa.eu/monsanto-en-europe-10318.html. However, let's not be fooled. This publicised move, in the midst of a strong communication offensive from the biotech industry lobby, aims at diverting attention from the company, while it is devoting its resources to make sure it gains acceptance to importing its GMO products, including its new poisonous GMOs, such as Smartstax, that contains up to 6 insecticide-producing genes and 2 herbicide-tolerance genes, and other stacked-genes GMOs. Monsanto is also still pushing for renewal of the authorisation of the only GMO crop that is allowed for growing in the EU, insecticide-producing GMO maize MON810, even though nine EU countries have banned it. It is also pushing the Commission to authorise pollen from MON810 to contaminate honey. If Monsanto really wants to buy a new clean suit, it needs to decide at least to stop growing MON810 in the EU, so as to keep it GMO-free as EU citizens wish.

Conference on Agroecology

On 26th June, the Greens/EFA group helped organising the policy part of the conference: *Agroecology for Sustainable Food Systems in Europe: A Transformative Agenda*, organised by the Centre for Agroecology and Food Security at Coventry University (CAFS, UK), European Network of Scientists for Social and Environmental Responsibility (ENSSER, Germany), Fondation Sciences Citoyennes (FSC, France), Groupe Interdisciplinaire de Recherche en Agroécologie du FNRS (GIRAF, Belgium), International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements EU (IFOAM EU, Belgium). MEPs Philippe Lambert (Belgium) and Yves Cochet (France) introduced and concluded the European Parliament session of the conference, before it gathered again at Université Libre de Belgique (ULB). It attracted more than 100 participants, triggered much discussion and brought interesting perspectives for future work. The most significant result in terms of future activities is the offer of Michel Pimbert, director of the Centre for Agriculture and Food Safety at Coventry University to draft an application for a COST Network that would include the major participating institutions and organisations at the conference. The program of the conference and the presentations are available at: http://www.ensser.org/increasing-public-information/agroecology-conference/

Question for written answer to the Commission

Green MEP Sandrine Bélier asked the Commission about its intention after Romania adopted a bill authorising the cultivation of GMOs in protected areas, including sites in the European Natura 2000 network. Despite the concerns expressed by the EU Environment Council in December 2008, on protecting sensitive and/or protected areas from GMO cultivation, Mr Potočnik, Commissioner for the Environment, answered on behalf of the Commission on 30th August that the Commission does not intend to propose new measures preventing GMO cultivation in Natura 2000 areas. On the contrary, it stresses that “the Commission's proposal for a Regulation amending the GMO Directive 2001/18/EC [called the proposal to "renationalise" GMO authorisations] is still under discussion by the legislator and should allow Member States to restrict or prohibit the cultivation of GMOs in their territory on legitimate concerns

other than those related to risks to human and animal health or the environment. Member States are allowed to adopt more stringent protective measures for the environment if they so wish as long as these are compatible with the EU treaties". Alas, the experience with bans on growing MON810 maize shows that the Commission has never considered any of these (numerous) bans to be compatible with the EU treaties, neither the ECJ.

Vandana Shiva

International activist and scientist Dr Vandana Shiva visited the European Parliament on 18th September and gave a public lecture on The Law of the Seed, hosted by the Greens/EFA group. Afterward she also explained clearly in a 2 minute video message how GMOs are a threat to biodiversity and farmers' livelihoods.

Member State/EU news:

France
MON810 Moratorium undone

On 1st August, French Conseil d'Etat cancelled the French arrêté from March 2012 that suspended the authorisation of growing MON810 GMO maize. This arrêté aimed at replacing previous ones (from 2007 and 2008) that had been also cancelled by Conseil d'Etat. It considered that such a safeguard measure can only be taken in a case of emergency and in a situation of an important and imminent risk to human or animal health or the environment that is based on new elements from reliable scientific data. In its conclusions, Conseil d'Etat argues that neither EFSA's opinion from 8th December, 2011 nor any element of the dossier could characterise such a risk. Given the widespread agreement in French society and political groups, these conclusions have been rejected and the government committed to uphold the moratorium under more solid legal grounds.

Italy
MON810 Moratorium in the making

See (GMO (In)digest 8) Italian ministries of agriculture, health and environment signed last July a decree banning the cultivation of MON810 GMO maize due to environmental concerns, and in particular the crop's "negative impact on biodiversity". The European Commission and EU Member States have been notified and the Commission will look into the Italian safeguard measure in more detail, and has already asked EFSA to assess the scientific basis for the decision. A recent survey has shown that nearly 80 percent of Italians are in support of a ban, according to Italy's biggest farmers group Coldiretti.

Poland
Commission refers Poland to Court

See (GMO (In)digest 8) On 20th June, the EU Commission decided to take Poland to the European Court of Justice for non-compliance with EU rules on monitoring of Genetically Modified Organisms' cultivation. Indeed, Directive 2001/18/EC requires that GMO cultivation locations are notified to competent national authorities, recorded in a register established by the Member State, and made known to the public, in order to allow the establishment of coexistence measures and to ensure monitoring of possible effects of GMOs on the environment. However, despite the Commission having sent a reasoned opinion asking Poland to take action to address deficiencies in the implementation of the EU legislation concerning the monitoring of GMO cultivation on 22nd November, Poland has failed to adequately comply with applicable EU law and may be subject to financial penalty. While it is true that Poland has not put any requirement for information on GMO fields in its GMO legislation, this referral seems quite a paradox today as last January Poland had prohibited the growing of the two GMOs that are allowed at the EU level, making it a country where there are no GMO fields.

Around the world

USA
Illegal GMO wheat threatens US exports

Unapproved genetically modified wheat that was never approved for U.S. sale or consumption has been found growing in Oregon in May and is threatening U.S. exports of the world's biggest traded food commodity. Japan has temporarily suspended import tenders for western white wheat for food and western wheat for feed. Korea announced that it would test upon arrival all wheat and wheat flour from the United States. EU advised its Member States to test consignments of US soft white wheat. The wheat was developed years ago by Monsanto and was authorised for field test in 16 states from 1998 to 2005, but never put onto the market due to concerns of worldwide opposition to GMO wheat. The most recent field test of such wheat was in 2005. The Biotechnology Regulatory Services of the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) have launched a formal investigation. So far, the investigation has brought no explanation on how this GMO wheat could have ended in the Oregon field, prompting Monsanto to air the crazy suspicion of a "sabotage" by anti-GMO groups. Previous crop contaminations by experimental field trials, and specifically contamination of US rice by a strain of GMO rice from Bayer had been qualified as "an act of God" by the company, in acknowledging their complete lack of control. This GMO wheat appearing in a farmer's field years after completing the last field trial is yet another demonstration that GMOs cannot be controlled when they have been released into the environment.

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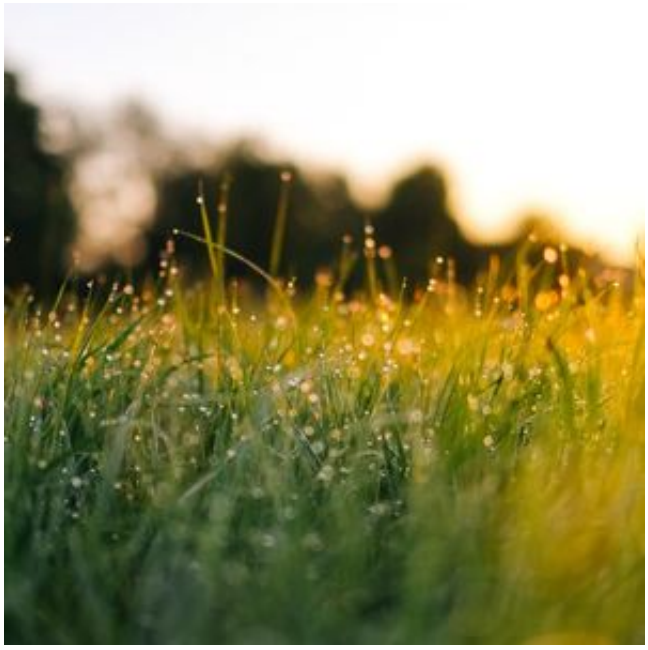
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