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GMOs to be debated in the European Parliament

Prof. Séralini invited by the Petitions Committee

On Monday, 27th May 2013, three petitions relating to GMOs are going to be discussed in the Committee on Petitions of the European Parliament. For this important session, the Committee has invited Prof. Séralini, who has shaken the biotech industry world with the first scientific publication on long term toxicological studies of a GMO and its associated herbicide, Commissioner Borg and the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA). The issue that these petitions raised are indeed very serious. The first one, Petition 813/2008 by Brian John on alleged breaches of the general principles governing the activity of the European Food Safety Agency (EFSA) in connection with the examination of the applications for Genetically Modified foods, claims that, in carrying out its activity, EFSA fails to protect the interests of the European citizens, to guarantee consumer protection and to provide independent scientific advice as it bases its opinion on GMO authorisation demands only on data provided by the applicants. The petitioner also criticises the non-transparent way in which EFSA assesses the files and considers that data in such application should be open to public scrutiny. The scientific independence of EFSA is crucial to establish trust in EFSA's opinions of GMOs, which are the basis for the Commission to take the political decision to ask Member States to authorize a GMO. Today, this trust is not there for the public, for independent scientists and for NGOs. EFSA has been criticised for its bias towards industry for many years. The Greens/EFA group has publicly denounced blatant conflicts of interest within EFSA, in particular the unhealthy links between EFSA's chair, Ms Bánáti, and the industry lobby group International Life Sciences Intitute (ILSI), that led to her resignation in May 2012. NGOs have also shown numerous conflicts of interest in different scientific panels of EFSA, including the GMO panel, and denounced the "revolving doors" practices, where EFSA employees join the industry right after EFSA without any cooling-off period. Even the European Court of Auditors has underlined the issue. Undue industry influence on the scientific output of the agency may explain why all EFSA's opinions on GMOs so far have been positive

and claimed the absence of health or environmental risks. Even the EP has shown concern about how EFSA delivers its opinions, and did not grant EFSA's 2010 budget discharge until it takes meaningful measures to sever its ties with the industry. It is true that the pressure has led to some improvements, under the impulse of EFSA's Executive Director, Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle: Ms Bánáti was asked to resign from her position, scientific panels have begun to be opened to external observers, new rules to avoid conflicts of interest are being designed and ILSI's influence is being reduced, at least formally. Still, these improvements fall short of the "revolution" that is needed in the Risk Assessment of GMOs, both in terms of the methodology, the origin and publicity of the data that are used and the range of scientists that are represented in the scientific panels. EFSA needs to get rid of the ILSI legacy in the Risk Assessment methodology itself, which dates back from the 90's when the OECD guidelines had been written with the hand of the botech industry. These OECD guidelines, which use the absurd concept of substantial equivalence to compare a GMO and its conventional counterpart, have been used as the model for EFSA's guidelines and carry the industry seal of approval. When actual members of the new GMO panel have been involved in the design of these guidelines, when the Commission and EFSA concur that the EP and NGOs have raised valid and serious issues of conflicts of interest and imbalance in the scientific panel's views about GMOs, but at the same time pretend that the scientific assessments are of the highest standard and are not challengeable, there is no way of letting us believe that the problems in assessing GMOs have been solved. The recent nomination of Juliane Kleiner as EFSA's Director of Science Strategy & Coordination is of concern. Although having worked at EFSA for 10 years now, she has previously been senior scientist at ILSI Europe, responsible for the scientific management and support of the food safety programme for 7 years. Can we believe that one can strip out all their links, ways of thinking and ideological belief in GMO safety just because one enters EFSA! Also of concern is the EFSA resistance to a two-year toxicology study on GMOs. EFSA was expected to provide support for a protocol on this study and its advice would help shape the planned research project by DG Research and Innovation, motivated by the Séralini study. The GMO panel, under its chair Joe Perry, himself a member of the previous GMO panel and also suspected by NGOs to have had links with the biotech industry, raised some concern about the usefulness of such a trial with whole foods/feeds without having a clear objection to such a trial, according to EU Food Policy, 17th May 2013. But independent of its scientific value, Séralini's paper, which has nevertheless been published in a renowned peer-reviewed scientific journal, has shown that there has never been any long term toxicological study on GMOs. Are we going to be reassured when an ILSI infiltrated authority tells us these long term studies are useless, instead of designing an accepted protocol to do a meaningful one? Another petition that is going to be discussed on Monday relates to the Commission's implementing regulation on food and feed risk assessment of GMOs. This regulation was adopted by the Commission last February. Although it may be considered an improvement from the past situation because it makes 90-days rat toxicological testing mandatory for all single event GMOs, it is still utterly far from satisfactory. In particular, the regulation states 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 may authorise something like 50 GMOs that have been assessed by a process that it has itself found to be insufficient. This is ridiculous. In November, following the concerted reaction from industry scientists to trash the Séralini article, a number of MEPs, under the initiative of Green MEP Michèle Rivasi, wrote an open letter to the Commission asking for transparency on the risk assessment studies, new long-term studies, a revision of the health and environment risk assessment guidelines, a new fund for independent and contradictory studies and a new legislative framework to prevent conflicts of interests. These discussions around the petitions, with the presence of Dr. Séralini, will indeed be interesting. Our Greens/EFA MEPs will be in the Committee, defending the petitioner and Prof Séralini, and will remind all of our call for a moratorium on all GMO authorisations while the scientific expertise on GMOs has not been satisfactorily reshaped. The session will be webstreamed at
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