News | 26.03.2018

Meat, animal feed and the EU's unbearable hypocrisy on GMOs

How GMOs enter the EU unnoticed

This morning, the NGO Mighty Earth published a powerful report on the dire consequences of the current EU meat, milk and eggs production system on those countries, especially in Latin America, which produce the feed for farm animals.

The report explains that The EU imports 27.8 million tons of soy from South America every year, and highlights the terrible conditions in which it is produced. Massive deforestation to make room for soy crops - more than 8 million hectares in the last 12 years - released the equivalent of 3.024 million metric tons of CO2 and endangered rare species and fragile ecosystems. According to the World Bank, the use of agrichemicals - especially glyphosate - increased by 1000 % in 20 years due to the cultivation of GM soy; this has resulted in water, air and soil pollution, and has provoked disastrous effects on the health of local populations. A staggering 19 % of deaths in Argentina are caused by cancer, disproportionally located in soy cultivation areas.

This terrible reality is the direct cause of a major, and terribly hypocritical, contradiction at the heart of the EU's policy on GMOs. This contradiction is largely invisible to EU citizens, as it does not affect the labelling of food, and does not lead to any protesting activists mowing GM fields In order to discover it, you would have to delve into the story of more than 70 GM crops which are allowed to enter the EU as feed for our farm animals.

A soybean... and two dangerous herbicides

Let's take the example of a variety of soybean sold by the US-based multinational Dow AgroSciences. This soybean, poetically named "DAS68416-4", has been genetically engineered to tolerate the use of two herbicides: glufosinate-ammonium and 2,4D.

These herbicides have, as all herbicides do, a negative effect on the environment and biodiversity. This is even more the case when they are used alongside varieties that have been rendered tolerant to them. Indeed, it has been shown that, in the absence of risk to their own crop[1], farmers use higher quantities of these products. Not to mention the possible combined effects of glufosinate and 2,4 D on the environment.

Further, the herbicides in question are both suspected of having negative impacts on health. In an evaluation from 2005, the European Food Safety Authority highlighted that glufosinate shows reproductive toxicity: the product is about to be phased out of EU fields as a consequence. 2,4 D has a metabolite (2,4-DCP) which may cause negative metabolic and genotoxic effects, and which, like 2,4-D itself, is listed as "a possible carcinogen based on inadequate evidence in humans and limited evidence in experimental animals" by the WHO'S cancer research international agency IARC.

Are we poisoning the rest of the world to feed our farm animals?

In light of this information, it is very clear that this soybean would never be allowed for cultivation in the EU - there would be an outcry from civil society and a majority of member states would refuse its cultivation within their territory (as is currently the case with maize Mon810). Yet soybean DAS68416-4 has been allowed to enter the EU by way of imports, as were numerous toxic and environmentally damaging GM varieties before it. In the last 3 years only, 18 new GM crops have been authorized to enter the EU market!

Their use in food is extremely marginal, as EU citizens have proven their deep-rooted rejection of GMOs, but it will flood our cows', pigs' and poultry's mangers - whose produce (meat, eggs, milk) will not be labelled as GMO-derived. The EU seems comfortable with the fact that other countries might destroy their own environment and poison their own farmers and rural population, in order to enable us to maintain our unsustainable animal production.

Over the past 36 months, the European Parliament has objected 23 times to these import authorisations, and will vote again soon on a GM sugar beet. Despite the absence of political support from the European Parliament or the member states, the undemocratic and opaque decision-making process (see our article on this topic) means that the decision is usually in the hands of the EU Commission..

It is time to change the model

Fortunately, there are solutions to this unacceptable situation. For a start, we need to relocate the production of protein crops from ex-tropical forest or savannah, to boost EU and regional protein crop production; notably by adding leguminous plants to crop rotations and taking better advantage of pasture-based grazing. These are some of the goals of a report soon to be voted in the European Parliament[2]. By developing the production of European non-genetically modified protein crops, we would solve many of the problems outlined in Mighty Earth's report, and significantly reduce our negative impact on climate

change, while fostering local markets in animal feed that are not environmentally or socially destructive.

It is also time to allow consumers to have a impact by exercising a choice in the matter, by finally labelling milk, meat and eggs coming from GMO-fed animals. Implementing this well-established demand from the Greens/EFA would remove the smoke screen used by some member states to approve the imports of GMOs in the EU while refusing their cultivation on their own territory.

Finally, we have to rethink our animal farming model: industrial animal farming is destructive for the environment and the communities, and non-remunerative for EU farmers. It only serves the interest of the agro-chemical industry and the intercontinental trade in commodities. The new common agricultural policy needs to finally support systems serving citizens, including consumers and farmers.

---

[1] These herbicides can be used during the whole cultivation and not only at the very beginning thanks to the tolerance introduced through genetic modification

[2] European strategy for the promotion of protein crops - Encouraging the production of protein and leguminous plants in the European agriculture sector

Recommended

Opinion

[PFAS in Wine, Water & Makeup: How We Can Ban Forever C…]

18.06.2025

Press release

Image by joakant from Pixabay

[Greens/EFA welcome the European Ocean Pact and call fo…]

05.06.2025

Press release

ricardo-gomez-angel

[Simplification must not come at cost of climate]

14.05.2025

Press release

Image by Marcel Langthim from Pixabay

[While the right cries wolf, the Habitats Directive is …]

08.05.2025

Contact person

Juliette Leroux

Advisor on Agriculture and Rural Development

Please share

- E-Mail