

Press Release

European farmers demand right to GM-free seed

Brussels, 16 July 2004 – Farmers around Europe are concerned about the European Commission's proposal to allow levels of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in all seeds. The provision, which is due to be adopted by Commissioners on September 8, would allow genetically-modified organisms (GMOs) to be present in all conventional and organic seeds within 0.3-0.5% limit, without farmers be aware of that. In a letter to the Commission dated Friday, July 9, European conventional and organic farmer associations called for a labelling threshold at the reliable detection limit in line with the detection methods capability development (currently 0.1%).

"European farmers' groups are deeply concerned about the severe consequences of this proposal on agriculture and on their members' ability to maintain their agricultural practices and keep their products free from GMOs, as requested by most consumers, food producers and supermarkets in the European Union," said José Ramon Cendan, Board member of the European Farmers Coordination (CPE).

"We appeal to all Commissioners to reject the current draft proposal and instead go beyond for establishing a mandatory GMO-labelling of seeds based on the detection limit evolving over time and setting rigorous purity standards in the EU seed legislation. Such an approach will drastically reduce costs for farmers and the whole production chain and will guarantee an effective free choice for consumers and producers, in line with the Commission's main goals. Differently, our high quality food production will be irreparably compromised", said Stefano Masini, Chairman Environmental Policy OF Coldiretti.

"The Commission has to take into account that most European farmers have to and want to supply a non-GMO market. As long as farmers are the weakest point in the production chain, they will be obliged to take most of the risk and burden on their shoulders, added Maira Dzelzkaleja, Latvian Farmers Parliament.

"Farmers who wish to produce non-GMO products will be trapped between the two contamination thresholds: 0.5% of their input seeds and 0.9% of their final food product. This situation will bring in the production process constant uncertainty, additional risk and costs. Several studies have shown the difficulties in controlled environment to limit the final product's contamination under 0,9% by using 0,3-0,5% GM contaminated seeds. Under natural conditions, therefore, creeping contamination will be the rule and the provision of non-GM food to consumers will become a high risk business" mentioned Jan Krzysztof Ardanowski, President of Kujawsko-Pomorska Izba Rolnicza, Polish Agriculture Chamber.

"Additional measures to ensure seed purity should be taken at source. The seed industry is able to ensure the purity of their seeds at the minimum detection level, as currently it is regularly done in Europe. It is more reliable, easier and much less costly for the industry than for farmers or the food industry. The cost of control and prevention in farm production on millions of hectares would far exceed preventive costs at the level of seed production," explained José Ramón Urbán, Chairman Environmental Policy of Coordinadora de Organizaciones de Agricultores Y Ganaderos of Spain. On the basis of the proposed thresholds, the Joint Research Center (2001) estimated that the measures necessary to prevent GM contamination rising above the legal labelling limits would cost farmers between €53 and €345 per hectare. If you look at the net margin for the considered crops, farmers will therefore have to pay a large amount of money just for the prevention alone!"

The current proposal contradicts the Commission promise to ensure that co-existence between GM and conventional production will be possible in future. "If the Commission is serious about maintaining non-GM agriculture, then the lowest practicable threshold in seeds is vital. The thresholds proposed will not enable farmers to produce food and feed within the 0.9% contamination limit. This will make organic production increasingly impossible – such levels of GM contamination would introduce a risk of organic farmers losing their market, even losing their organic status," said Francis Blake, President of the IFOAM EU Group, the umbrella organisation of the organic movement.

Farmers believe that the sense of responsibility of the present Commission will suggest to postpone the adoption of such a highly controversial and sensitive legislation, considering that most of the present Commissioners will not be anymore in their position to follow up the development of the debate within the Standing Committee and with Member States up to its implementation.

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