



Press Statement

French fears on biotech maize totally unfounded

Brussels, January 11th, 2008

The provisional High Level Authority put in place in the beginning of December 2007 by the French President to examine the safety of GM crops has looked at issues that have undergone many peer reviews by scientific bodies around the world and have been found to be of no concern. The European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) has reviewed this dossier several times and never found reasons for concern either.

The specific biotech maize has also been the subject of thorough scientific reviews by scientific communities around the world and has received positive approvals by the world's most robust approval systems, as well as EFSA; there has been full approval within the EU since 1998 including for cultivation. It has also been approved in 13 other countries and grown by millions of farmers. There is therefore no reason for the French provisional High Authority, other than short-term politics, to express doubt about the ability of French farmers to safely cultivate biotech maize in France. If acted upon, it would be a massive blow to French farmers, and also have a negative impact on all farmers in Europe.

In arriving at their decision, we appeal to the French Authorities to strictly adhere to the scientific criteria and facts as considered by EFSA.

For further information, contact:

Nathalie Moll; GBE Executive Director,
Tel: +32 2 739 11 85 Mob: +32 473 884 578 email: n.moll@europabio.org

Adeline Farrelly, EuropaBio Communications Director
Tel: +32 2 739 11 74 Mob: +32 475 931 724 Fax: +32 2 735 4960
e-mail: a.farrelly@europabio.org

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Some background facts

France is one of Europe's largest maize growers; thus, any suspension of biotech maize plantings would increase the environmental footprint of maize production in France. In 2007, French farmers grew almost 22 000 hectares of Bt maize, saving 29 000 litres of fuel, 86 500 kg of CO₂, 8 800 litres less insecticide – all for 25 000 tonnes of additional maize which translates into additional income for French farmers of €1.5 million.

Bt maize contains a gene allowing the maize to defend itself against the European corn borer, an insect pest present mainly in southern and middle Europe but steadily making its way north. In France, an estimated 1 million hectares is affected by the European corn borer.

To date, Bt maize is the only type of biotech crop grown in the EU. In 2007, cultivation in eight EU Member States totalled 110 077 hectares, a 77% increase over last year.

Who benefits from GM crops?

According to the latest research (1), two thirds (62 per cent) of the value of first generation GM crops in Europe is captured downstream by farmers and consumers, while one third (38 percent) is extracted by upstream firms (gene developers and seed producers). The per hectare values of GM technologies for maize and oilseed rape range from €30 to €78 according to various analyses.

In the specific case of Hungary, maintaining a total *de facto* ban on GM crops would cost Hungarian farmers €45 million annually, a burden borne mainly by maize growers denied two technologies (insect resistance and herbicide tolerance) which can help them confirm their competitive position in the EU. Any similar action in France would threaten to replicate the Hungarian position in France, seriously and negatively impacting the competitive position of French farmers.

Gene Flow and GM crops

Some arguments on gene flow from biotech maize were raised by the provisional High Authority. However maize does not have sexually compatible relatives in Europe, so gene flow to crops or plants other than maize can not occur. Moreover, extensive studies have been carried out on pollen flow with the most recent report from the Council for Agricultural Science and Technology (CAST) released just last week on the “implications of gene flow in the scale-up and commercial use of biotechnology-derived crops”. That report concluded that “to date, there have been no major health or environmental setbacks due to gene flow from biotech crops; in fact, these crops have led to significant, documentable improvements and, in some instances, decreased environmental risks”.

(1) “GM crops in Europe: How much value and for whom?” just published by the Center for agriculture and food economics K.U.Leuven on EuroChoices.

This paper is a literature review and summary of a previous research on the impact of GM crops. More information can be found on the EUWAB website:

<http://www.biw.kuleuven.be/aee/clo/euwab.htm>

(2) CAST Issue Paper No. 37, December 2007

www.cast-science.org/displayProductDetails.asp?idProduct=149

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