

EU weighs proposals to break GMO deadlock

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Plans to let national governments decide whether to allow genetically modified (GM) crop cultivation on their land could unblock a paralysis in EU GMO approvals, but risk igniting internal market disputes.

At present, EU member states are able to restrict GM crop cultivation only under strict conditions as authorisation licences are valid across the 27-country bloc, in accordance with the principles of the single EU internal market.

José Manuel Barroso, president of the European Commission, has voiced support for any plan that would maintain an EU-wide authority over GMO safety assessment and approval, while allowing countries the freedom to decide whether to cultivate GM crops.

Proposals from the Dutch and Austrian governments, under consideration by the executive European Commission, have won the backing of several countries and interested parties, and will be at the top of the new Commission's agenda.

If the plan succeeds, the proposal could see speedier authorisation of GM crop varieties, giving more choice to farmers who are increasingly dependent on them for cost benefits, especially in the animal feed sector.

But some see the plans as fraught with risks and incompatible with the bloc's internal market laws, which guarantee the free movement of goods. They could also engender competitive war between farmers in different countries and contravene international trade laws.

"It would be potentially setting a bad precedent for the politics of the internal market," said Garlich von Essen of the European Seed Association, an organisation of seed industry groups in the EU.

"Suddenly you would have products which are considered safe for use in all of the European Union, and at the same time, banned in some parts [...] without any protocol other than political considerations," he said.

Though practical details of the proposals are still to be worked out, any plan may entail changes to the EU's legislative framework, a protracted process which would require that a decision be made jointly with the European Parliament.

Risks and benefits

Authorising GMOs for consumption, processing or cultivation in Europe is a politically charged subject with many openly hostile to what they call 'Frankenstein foods'. Nations have consistently clashed over GMO policy without reaching consensus.

The Netherlands, which has a more liberal attitude towards GMOs, hopes to ease the political pressure in the approval procedure and give governments more policy options.

"It is not a question of whether we should be against or pro GMOs, because GMOs [around] the world won't go away, but it is the way that we deal with them," said a spokesman for the

Dutch agriculture ministry.

"You can't stop them so you have to accept that there are GMOs and there are large regions in the world that cultivate GMOs," he said, outlining the Dutch ministry's position.

"You can't go on as the European Union thinking you're on an island."

Britain, which believes the EU approval process is too slow, has welcomed the Dutch initiative and sees some risks and benefits in it. Austria, a long-standing opponent to GMOs, endorsed the plan so as to be able to opt out and stay GMO-free.

But Andrew Jarvis, research fellow at the Chatham House think-tank in London, says an expected "quick fix" to the deadlock in EU decision-making on GMOs could be elusive.

Any proposal must have a firm legal basis and be achievable within a reasonable time. It must also address contentious issues while avoiding new barriers, Jarvis said.

"Without those guarantees in place there is concern that the EU could embark on a protracted process of legislative review [...] but end up with a system less workable and no faster or more certain than that which it started with," he said.

Untenable situation

Since 1998, only two crops have been cleared for cultivation in the EU. Just one of those, Monsanto's Mon 810, is actually being cultivated, on roughly 108,000 hectares of land. That compares with about 30 GM crops grown in over 102 million hectares worldwide, industry figures show.

"The present policy of the Council [EU ministers] and Commission of allowing certain GMOs to be imported from outside the EU for food and feed use, but not for growing, is untenable," said Eric Tollens, professor of agriculture and food economics at the Catholic University of Leuven in Belgium.

"It is a matter of time before this incoherence blows up. You cannot continue import and use indefinitely and not growing what you can perfectly well grow," he said.

Over the last nine years, the EU has on average imported an equivalent of 32 million tonnes of soybeans annually, most of it from GM plants.

"We import 70-80% of our total protein supply. We are unhappy with the situation because EU farmers cannot continue to ignore market realities," said Pekka Pesonen, secretary-general of the EU farmers union Copa-Cogeca, welcoming the proposals