

BIOTECHNOLOGY AND GENETICALLY MODIFIED ORGANISMS (GMOs)

Background

The attached paper (EPG 31/97 Draft 2) identifies the ELO's views in relation to development of the biotechnology industry and the introduction of genetically modified crops.

In general, the ELO recognises the possible benefits to be obtained from biotechnological innovation and believes that European farmers must be able to compete effectively on world agricultural markets. However, it is increasingly clear that development of the biotechnology industry has widespread implications for landowners and farmers, for consumer confidence, for public health and for ecological systems. As such, we believe that the introduction of GM crops will need careful management and that unfettered 'commercial solutions' may not be appropriate. They will need rigorous research and development and the product effectiveness communicated to the consumer as safe and wholesome.

The ELO believes there should be further EU Regulatory Controls and further research on the development and introduction of GM crops, taking into account their possible adverse effects on human health (especially in relation to horizontal gene transfer and genetic recombination), sustainability and the environment. There should also be a recognition that field trials may be limited in terms of informing how such crops may perform / behave in the longer term; ie. in 'natural situations', conditions are more 'open' and hence more complex interactions can occur; sometimes giving very different results. Landowners are concerned that commercial pressures may be pushing them into areas from which it would be difficult to retract. As such, the ELO would be grateful to have the Commission's clarification on the following considerations.

ELO considerations

- (1) The ELO asks to what extent the Commission has acted upon the European Parliament's April 1997 Resolution and shares its concerns (especially in relation to current WTO rules?). The Resolution:
 - calls for the authorisation procedure to be re-opened and suspended until a re-appraisal has been completed;
 - asks the Commission to make public the full analysis of the three scientific Committees to GMOs;
 - asks the Commission to make public the names of the experts of the three scientific Committees;
 - regrets that the WTO rules (eg.) only require the country of import to show evidence of harmfulness of the product rather than requiring the exporter to demonstrate its harmlessness;
 - challenges the inter-consultation procedure within the Commission and calls for a more democratic procedure to be applied in future.

- (2) The ELO is concerned about a lack of WTO responsiveness in the face of the debate. In particular, by the WTO's own Committee on Trade and Environment, mandated to examine the environmental impact of the Trade Related Intellectual Property (TRIPS) and Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) Agreements. Does the Commission share this concern?
- (3) The ELO wishes to have clarification of recently adopted EU legislation on the labelling of GM products. There is still a concern that unclear labelling legislation from Brussels will undermine the rights of consumers to full knowledge.
- (4) The ELO would like to know how the Commission is considering the role of the Precautionary Principle, as defined by the EC Treaty, in relation to its overall policy on GMOs
- (5) The ELO asks what consideration have been given by the Commission as to the role of the Convention on Biodiversity (CBD) Secretariat in respect of GM patents, releases and experimentation.
- (6) The ELO asks whether the Commission has given consideration to the CBD Provisions to guarantee the conservation of biodiversity.
- (7) The ELO wonders how the TRIPS Article 27 exceptions, to protect plants and animals, should be interpreted in the context of GMOs.
- (8) The ELO believes more consideration needs to be given to the issues raised by the role GMOs might play in sustainable agriculture, particularly in relation to their 'knock-on' and 'collective' effects.
- (9) What consideration has the Commission given to a legally based international approach to the 'post-release' monitoring of GM products and who will be required to finance this?

Future Action

The Policy Group's views are sought, and in particular that a letter is sent to Commissioner Fischler covering the points set out.

ELO Policy Group
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