

FRIENDS OF THE EARTH EUROPE PRESS RELEASE

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EU MINISTERS VOTE TO KEEP GM FOOD BANS
Commission defeated

Luxembourg 24 June 2005 - Environment Ministers from across Europe today voted to allow countries to keep their safety bans on genetically modified (GM) foods. The Ministers rejected by a qualified majority all the proposals by the European Commission to lift the bans in Austria, Luxembourg, France, Greece and Germany. The Commission's move follows a dispute over GM foods at the World Trade Organisation, where the United States is claiming national bans are a barrier to trade. Over 70% of the European public are against GM foods.

The Ministers however failed to reach the qualified majority required to prevent approval of another GM maize - referred to as MON 863 - which caused unexplained kidney damage to rats, according to research conducted by the manufacturer, biotech giant Monsanto. Monsanto has refused to release all the results of its own test on this GM food.

Adrian Bebb, GMO Campaigner for Friends of the Earth Europe said: "The European Commission asked for more guidance from the member states and they got it. Countries today have demanded the sovereign right to ban genetically modified crops if there are questions over their safety. The Commission now faces a test of credibility - will it listen to national governments and the public, or carry on with its unpopular policy of pushing GM foods and crops into Europe? It is time to reconnect with the public and protect them from unwanted GM foods and crops."

Since 1997, five EU countries have banned various GM crops on safety grounds. (1) The Commission asked all EU member states to vote on proposals requiring the five countries to lift their bans within 20 days.(2) Ministers today voted overwhelmingly to allow these bans to remain.

The Commission's proposals are seen as a direct result of the trade dispute in the World Trade Organisation (WTO) that was started in 2003 by the United States, Argentina and Canada. These countries, all big producers of GM crops, claim that Europe's precautionary stance on GM food, including the national bans, are a barrier to free trade and harm their farmers. The WTO is expected to deliver an interim ruling in August.

Today's vote also questions the credibility of the European Food Standards Agency (EFSA). Last year the EFSA claimed the national bans had no scientific basis - a view rejected today by member states. Friends of the Earth, who have been deeply critical of EFSA's pro-biotech position and their close links with the GMO industry, today called for a major review into the independence and scientific standards of the EFSA. (3)

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NOTES

(1) Friends of the Earth briefings and a cyber action urging Ministers to reject the Commission proposals are available at http://www.foeeurope.org/ban_risky_gm_food/index.php

(2) The Commission proposals can be found at:
www.foodlaw.rdg.ac.uk/news/eu-05037.htm

(3) The Friends of the Earth report: Throwing Caution to the Wind can be downloaded at:
<http://www.foeeurope.org/GMOs/publications/EFSAreport.pdf>

The national bans are:

Germany

Syngenta's Bt176 maize (banned 31/03/2000) - Reason: effects on non-target insects + transfer of antibiotic resistance genes to humans and animals + insects could develop resistance to the Bt

France

Bayer's oilseed rape Topas 19/2 (banned 16/11/1998) - Reason: impact of genetic escape and spread of herbicide tolerance
Bayer's oilseed rape MS1xRf1 (banned 16/11/1998) - Reason: impact of genetic escape and spread of herbicide tolerance

Austria

Syngenta's Bt176 maize (banned 13/02/1997) - Reason: effects on non-target insects such as butterflies + transfer of antibiotic resistance genes to humans and animals
Bayer's T25 maize (banned 28/4/2000) - Reason: protection of sensitive areas, lack of monitoring plan and concerns about the herbicide used
Monsanto's MON810 maize (banned 10/06/1999) - Reason: Effects on non-target insects

Luxembourg

Syngenta's Bt176 maize (banned 07/02/1997) - Reason: Transfer of antibiotic resistance genes to humans and animals

Greece

Bayer's oilseed rape Topas 19/2 (banned 08/09/1998) - Reason: impact of genetic escape