



Commission to allow GMO contamination of all seeds

Brussels, 3 May 2004 – Around 500 genetically modified maize plants and more than 2,000 GM oilseed rape plants would be allowed to grow on every hectare (10,000 square metres) of supposedly GM-free fields in Europe, according to a Commission proposal for a Directive "establishing minimum thresholds for adventitious or technically unavoidable traces of genetically modified seeds in other products". The Directive, which is due to be adopted by the College of Commissioners at the end of May, would allow for 0.3-0.5% of genetically-modified organisms (GMOs) to be present in all conventional and organic seeds, without farmers even knowing about it. Under the envisaged comitology procedure it could only be prevented from entering into force by a qualified (2/3) majority of all EU member states.

A petition signed by 200,000 European citizens demanding that GMOs in seeds be labelled at the detection limit is today being handed to EU Environment Commissioner Margot Wallstrom by the Save Our Seeds coalition. The petition is supported by more than 300 farmers', consumers' and environmental organisations, trade unions, food companies, scientists, churches and other civil society groups with more than 25 million members. The European Parliament and several Member States have also urged the European Commission to ensure seed purity.

The organisations are outraged about such a "back door" introduction of GM crops, which, they believe, would spell the end of GM-free farming and consumer choice in Europe, even for farmers and entire regions who refuse to plant GM crops. "This Directive would make a mockery of all the Commission's promises of transparency, precaution and freedom of choice for consumers and farmers," said Eric Gall of Greenpeace. "It gives the impression that Commissioner David Byrne, who initiated the legislation, has a hidden agenda – to obstruct the implementation of his own GM labelling and traceability regulations."

"As seeds can reproduce and spread into the environment, we are not talking about farmer information alone," explained Mauro Albrizio of the European Environmental Bureau (EEB). "Unlabelled seed contamination would also seriously hamper the appropriate monitoring and recall of these crops should anything go wrong."

"This Directive would effectively force farmers to grow GMOs. Those who want to guarantee that their products are not labelled as containing GMOs according to new EU regulations will be saddled with massive additional costs," said Mauro Poinelli of the Italian Confederazione nazionale COLDIRETTI, Europe's largest farmers organisation.

"If contamination through cross-pollination from neighbouring GMO fields adds to the seed contamination proposed by the Commission, there would be little to no chance for the 'co-existence' between GM and non-GM farming proposed by Agriculture Commissioner Franz Fischler," added Thomas Dosch of the IFOAM EU Group, the umbrella organisation of organic producers.

Legalising GMO contamination of the seed stock at the very beginning of the food chain would substantially drive up the costs of GM-free food and agriculture. The costs of GMO contamination – via segregation, extra testing, etc. – would fall to all the other food chain actors, right down to consumers. "The 'polluter pays' principle would be reversed," said Aude

L'hirondel, EURO COOP Food Policy Officer, "with those who want to avoid GMOs in their food and products paying the bill."

"Basically this Directive is the Trojan horse of the GM industry," said Benedikt Haerlin, coordinator of the Save our Seeds initiative. "It would allow them to intentionally withhold crucial information from their customers, only to reveal later that GMOs are everywhere and can no longer be avoided. The thresholds would be far less stringent than the purity standards currently observed by industry." Seeds tested by national authorities to date usually contain no GMOs at all and certainly never reach the high contamination levels now proposed by the Commission – even when they come from GMO-growing countries like the United States.

"We appeal to the Commission to establish mandatory GMO-labelling of seeds at the detection limit and to set rigorous purity standards in EU seed legislation. We also urge all 25 member state governments to prevent the outgoing Commission from leaving us with such an inconsistent piece of legislation."

ENDS

For more information, including

?? The draft of the Commission's Directive

?? Detailed memorandum on the impacts of seed contamination

?? List of organisations supporting the Save our Seeds Petition

?? Overview of Member State positions and their number of votes

see www.saveourseeds.org/press_may3.html

Contact

Benedikt Haerlin, Save Our Seeds, tel +49 173 9997555, www.saveourseeds.org

C/o Zukunftsstiftung Landwirtschaft, Marienstr.19, 10117 Berlin, Germany

Marco Schlüter, IFOAM EU Group (organic farmers association), tel. +32 (0)2 282 4665,

Mauro Albrizio, Vice-president, EEB, tel +32 (0)479 940251

Aude L'hirondel, EURO COOP Food Policy Officer, tel +32 (0)2 285 00 74 or +32 (0)475 52 76 90

Eric Gall, GMO policy advisor, Greenpeace European Unit, tel +32 (0)2 274 1906, tel +32 (0)496 161582

Mauro Poinelli, European office of Confederazione nazionale COLDIRETTI, tel +32 (0)2 230 9893