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Written Question No. 1819/83
by Mrs Marijke Van Hemeldonck (S - B)
to the Commission of the European Communities

Subject: Genetic engineering

According to a report by Prof. Jeff Schell of State University of Ghent, Belgium, to an international symposium held at Massachusetts Institute of Technology in October of this year, scientists have introduced into plantcells artificial genes that are turned on in the presence of light. This feat is considered an important step towards regulating the function of genetically engineered traits in plants.

Experts throughout the world hope to use genetic engineering to endow plants with resistance to disease or harmful chemicals, to add useful new substances to those already manufactured by plants, and to improve plant growth characteristics.

Is the Commission aware of the work of scientists in the field of genetic engineering? If so, is the Commission not of the opinion that these new tools of genetic engineering offer new perspectives for agriculture in the European Community? Is the Commission not of the opinion that through genetic engineering it will be possible to reduce or eliminate the use of pesticides?

Which support has the Commission already given to genetic engineering in the Community? What were the results? Which future action is the Commission going to take in this field?

ANSWER GIVEN BY MR. DAVIGNON ON BEHALF OF THE COMMISSION
TO WRITTEN QUESTION No. 1819/83 BY MRS VAN HEMELDONCK

Since 1977 the Commission has regularly reviewed and analysed discoveries in genetic engineering in their possible consequences for agriculture and industry. Based on this evaluation, the ongoing Community programme for training and research in biomolecular engineering (BEP) has been prepared and launched as from 1981.

The Commission shares the views of the Honourable Member that genetic engineering is likely to be of considerable impact to agriculture. The foreseeable progress in genetic engineering for agriculture should first benefit animal husbandry (with the genetic manipulation of vaccines, hormones, etc.) and crop development (with the manipulation of single genes that do something useful for the plant, or through the design of improved symbiotic relations with engineered soil microorganisms). The economic impact in the medium and long-term is likely to be important, knowing that biotechnological processes account for one third of the turnover of agrofood industries and that the figure is expected to be even higher in modern agriculture.

The main objective of cloning which carry the code for herbicide resistances is in fact to rationalize the use of herbicides by designing crops with a higher specificity towards their metabolic action. The Community programme on biomolecular engineering is also acting in that area.

Upon proposal from the Commission, the Council approved on 7 December 1981 the Community Research Programme on Biomolecular Engineering for a period of four years (1982-1986) to be executed in two phases. By decision 83/533/EEC of 26 October 1983(1) the Council approved the second phase of the programme's execution. The programme is to be implemented on the basis of cost-shared contracts. The total financial contribution from Community funds for the entire programme period is estimated at 15 mio ECU. One hundred and four research contractors and thirty-seven training contractors are presently participating in this programme.

At a contractors' meeting held in Louvain-La-Neuve on 7 to 9 November 1983, the progress of the individual research projects was discussed. Copies of the "Book of Abstracts" concerning the scientific contribution to the contractors' meeting as well as copies of the "Catalogue of Contracts" of the Research and Training programme in Biomolecular Engineering were sent to the Secretariat of the European Parliament on 10 February 1984. A copy of these two titles will also be sent directly to the Honourable Member.

In its communication to Council of 4 October 1983 "Biotechnology in the Community"(2), the Commission has summarised its intention as to future actions in this field. Consistent with this communication, a programme proposal in the field of biotechnology is under preparation for submission to Council and the European Parliament in 1984.

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(1) OJ N° L 305 of 8.11.1983, p. 11
(2) Doc. COM(83)672 final 2