



European Commission  
Directorate-General for Agriculture

# Newsletter

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## Biotechnology and agriculture — a challenge for the 21st century

**'We have the choice between actively shaping future policies, or being confronted with the policies shaped by others.' Thus Commissioner Fischler addressed <sup>(1)</sup> the informal Agriculture Council on 18 September at Alden Biesen, where biotechnology <sup>(2)</sup> was the theme. Winning public confidence is essential if Community businesses are to benefit from the opportunities offered by biotechnology. Consequently, policy-makers must take steps to ensure that any negative effects from these developments on health, agriculture and food, and the environment are avoided. Furthermore, Commissioner Byrne addressing the Council said, 'The choice that I want to give Europe's consumers is very simple — I can choose whether or not to buy food produced from a GMO.'**

At the Stockholm European Council in 2001, the Commission stressed the need for Europe to master the new technologies that are fundamental to building a knowledge-based economy. Europe needs to move forward with its research and regulatory activity if its agriculture and trade are not to be adversely affected.

- The first commercial GM crops were grown in 1996. The global GM crop area has increased 25-fold since then.
- By the end of 2001, about 50 million hectares of land, in 13 countries, will be planted commercially with genetically modified (GM) crops <sup>(3)</sup>, including soybean, maize, rapeseed and cotton. The US accounts for 70 % of these crops. The specific characteristics of these new cultivars were herbicide tolerance, insect resistance, delayed ripening and virus resistance.
- Field trials are under way in most EU Member States, but notifications have declined from 256 in 1997 to 44 in 2001.

### The challenges

A key objective in EU policy is to maintain rational and proportionate risk assessment procedures for both health and the environment. These are based on scientific criteria, and will be enforced by the European Food Authority, which will be established from January 2002, or by the relevant sectoral legislation (for example, for pharmaceuticals). The other key objective is to provide the consumer with freedom of choice about using GM products. Thus, the Commission has adopted proposals for legislation on labelling and traceability (see below) in tandem with assessment procedures.

Segregated chains of production and processing will allow farmers to choose the crop they want to produce, and consumers, the food they want to buy. Commissioner Fischler stressed at the informal Council: 'Organic produce must remain GM-free'. The Joint Research Centre <sup>(4)</sup> is conducting a study to analyse the good practices necessary for the farming sector to avoid cross-contamination.

### Legislation

The first EU directive on the deliberate release into the environment of GMOs was put in place by 1990 <sup>(5)</sup> and adapted and expanded in March 2001 to ensure safety assessment and public information <sup>(6)</sup>.

In 1997, the Novel Foods regulation <sup>(7)</sup> came into force, laying down the procedures for the authorisation and labelling of GM food (soybean and maize) prior to its introduction on the market.

In January 2000, the European Commission adopted a communication on the Precautionary Principle <sup>(8)</sup>. It covers cases where scientific evidence is insufficient, inconclusive or uncertain and preliminary scientific evaluation indicates that there are reasonable grounds

<sup>(1)</sup> SPEECH/01/388, available on the Rapid database.

<sup>(2)</sup> For more information, see the web site of the Directorate-General for Health and Consumer Affairs at [http://europa.eu.int/comm/dgs/health\\_consumer/index\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu.int/comm/dgs/health_consumer/index_en.htm).

<sup>(3)</sup> Global survey conducted by Dr Clive James, Chairman of the International Service for the Acquisition of Agri-biotech Applications (ISAAA), [http://www.isaaa.org/publications/briefs/Brief\\_21.htm](http://www.isaaa.org/publications/briefs/Brief_21.htm).

<sup>(4)</sup> <http://www.jrc.cec.eu.int/index.asp>.

<sup>(5)</sup> Directive 90/220/EEC.

<sup>(6)</sup> Directive 2001/18/EC replaces Directive 90/220/EEC and comes into effect in October 2002.

<sup>(7)</sup> Regulation (EC) No 258/97.

for concern about potentially dangerous effects on the environment, human, animal or plant health.

On 25 July 2001, the Commission adopted two proposals for Council and Parliament regulations concerning GMOs: one on GM food and feed <sup>(8)</sup>, and one on traceability and labelling of GM organisms and traceability of food and feed products produced from GM organisms <sup>(10)</sup>. These are currently under discussion in the Parliament. A proposal to amend current regulations on seeds, to take account of the specific requirements for GM seeds, is in consultation among the Commission services.

Given the need for continued public participation in the wider debate on biotechnology, the Commission held a consultative conference on 27 and 28 September 2001, at which it presented a communication 'Towards a strategic vision of Life Sciences and

Biotechnology: consultation document' <sup>(11)</sup>. Five EU Commissioners, including Mr Fischler, addressed the conference <sup>(12)</sup>. A workshop was also held in Brussels on 19 and 20 November 2001, to promote a dialogue on the implementation of Directive 2001/18/EC.

### Research

The European Commission has been supporting GMO safety research for over 15 years. It published a report on the results of this research on 9 October 2001 <sup>(13)</sup>, and has set up a round table <sup>(14)</sup> to discuss them with concerned parties, including farmers. The report summarises 81 projects that have received nearly EUR 70 million in EU funding, and involved over 400 scientific teams. This research, and international experience, has so far given no indications of any significant problems with the products and processes based on the new technologies.

<sup>(8)</sup> COM(2000) 1 final.

<sup>(9)</sup> COM(2001) 425 final.

<sup>(10)</sup> COM(2001) 182 final.

<sup>(11)</sup> <http://europa.eu.int/comm/biotechnology/>.

<sup>(12)</sup> IP/01/1317.

<sup>(13)</sup> The report is available on <http://europa.eu.int/comm/research/quality-of-life/gmo/index.html>.

<sup>(14)</sup> <http://Biosociety.dms.it>.

## News in brief

### One-year extension to nut aid

The European Commission adopted a proposal <sup>(1)</sup> on 21 November 2001, to extend the applicability of the current scheme <sup>(2)</sup> in the nut sector for a further year <sup>(3)</sup>. The scheme provides co-funding for quality and marketing plans drawn up by producer organisations. All improvement plans due to expire in 2001 will benefit from this extension. Some changes have been introduced: the aid of EUR 241.5 per hectare will now be co-financed, 75 % by the Community and 25 % by the Member States. Specific aid for hazelnut production has been included, to re-instate for one year the scheme <sup>(4)</sup> that was introduced for 1997-2000.

This interim measure will run to 15 June 2002. Meanwhile, the Commission services are carrying out a detailed analysis of the sector taking account of all its aspects — economic, social and environmental.

### New DG Agriculture publications <sup>(5)</sup>

The Directorate-General for Agriculture has issued several new publications. 'Organic farming — Guide to Community rules' outlines briefly the history of organic farming and explains the development of the community legislation that supports it. (See also the web site at [http://europa.eu.int/comm/agriculture/qual/organic/index\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu.int/comm/agriculture/qual/organic/index_en.htm)).

'The common agricultural policy: 2000 Review'. This is a short but comprehensive overview of the developments in the main areas of the common agricultural policy in 2000.

'Topic Report No 6: Towards agri-environmental indicators: integrating statistical and administrative data with land cover information'. This is a joint publication by four services of the European Commission — Directorates-General for Agriculture, Environment, Eurostat and the Joint Research Centre (ISP) — and the European Environment Agency.

Furthermore, the Internet pages on International Trade Relations of the DG Agriculture Internet site have been updated: [http://europa.eu.int/comm/agriculture/external/wto/index\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu.int/comm/agriculture/external/wto/index_en.htm). Publications, press releases and speeches dealing with the ministerial conference of the WTO (9-13 November 2001) are available on it.

<sup>(1)</sup> COM(2001) 667 final.

<sup>(2)</sup> Article 53 of Regulation (EC) No 2200/96.

<sup>(3)</sup> Previously extended for one year by Regulation (EC) No 558/2001.

<sup>(4)</sup> Article 55 of Regulation (EC) No 2200/96.

<sup>(5)</sup> Available on the web site of the Directorate-General for Agriculture: [http://europa.eu.int/comm/agriculture/publi/index\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu.int/comm/agriculture/publi/index_en.htm).

Also from the library, tel. (32-2) 29-56550. Catalogue Nos: KF-32-00-912-EN-C (Organic guide); KF-AB-01-001-EN-C (Review).



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