



European Commission
Directorate-General for Agriculture

Newsletter

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The co-existence of GM and non-GM crops: round table on research results

If genetically modified (GM) crops are to be used more widely in the future it is crucial that farmers have the means to keep GM and non-GM seeds and products separate. If the market demands both GM and conventional (including organic) crops, then consumers will want to make a choice, presumably paying different prices for products derived from each type. Farmers have a long experience of applying segregation techniques in seed production in order to maintain the purity of seeds of different crop varieties but GM crops pose an additional challenge. The Commission has taken a leading role in encouraging further research on segregation and some of the results were examined at a round table held by the Commission in Brussels on 24 April 2003.

The key findings of the round table were that:

- the EU cannot take a blanket approach — different crops need to be dealt with differently;
- regional differences must be accommodated;
- cost-effective solutions are needed.

These results will be fed into the overall debate into future use of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in EU agriculture.

Research and pilot projects into the co-existence of GM and non-GM crops are being encouraged through the EU's 'Strategy on life sciences and biotechnology' initiative. The aim is to confront the question at the heart of the debate over the use of GM crops: 'How can GM crops co-exist with conventional and organic crops, and how can the adventitious mixing of one with the other be minimised?'

The Commission is insisting that decisions on the key issues should be based on the best scientific and

research results. It maintains this is the only way to ensure rational debate about GM crops.

In line with the life sciences strategy's objective of involving all stakeholders, the round table brought together people from widely diverse backgrounds. Agriculture Commissioner Franz Fischler believes it is crucial that the debate about GMOs should be open and dispassionate. Opening the round table he said 'Co-existence is about ensuring that our farmers will have the chance to choose whether they want to produce conventionally, organically or using authorised GM crops. The only way forward is a fully transparent discussion with all the interested parties, based on sound science. This is what this round table wants to achieve.'

The round table mainly discussed technical agronomic issues such as how to keep crop mixing below acceptable thresholds. Recognising the controversial nature of the debate, the research covered by the strategy has been directed at only crop varieties — maize and rape-seed — that are either candidates for cultivation in the EU because authorisations for their use already exist or because approvals for them are in the pipeline.

The issue of co-existence relates only to the potential economic consequences resulting from the adventitious mixture between GM and non-GM crops. Risks to the environment or health are sufficiently addressed in the GMO authorisation process.

Protection of geographical indications and designations of origin: updated rules

The EU's agriculture ministers have updated regulations designed to ensure the authentic use of geographical sources and points of origin for food products.

The update has three important objectives. These are to:

- allow producers to include in their product specifications the requirement that packaging of products must take place in a defined geographical area so as

to preserve their typical characteristics and/or to ensure their traceability or control;

- bring the EU's regulation in line with the WTO's intellectual property rules and make it possible for third countries to apply for products to be registered under the EU system;
- include new products such as mustard and pasta in the scope of the regulation.

Rules on geographical indications and designations of origin are a key part of the EU's food quality policy. Their aim is to:

- encourage a greater diversity of agricultural production;
- protect product names from misuse and imitation;
- give the necessary information to consumers about the specific character and origins of products.

The regulations are justified by the need to protect a successful product name from imitation and exploitation by other products taking the same name. This unfair competition not only discourages producers but

also misleads consumers. To avoid these problems, the EU created in 1992 the systems known as PDO (protected designation of origin), PGI (protected geographical indication) and TSG (traditional speciality guaranteed) to promote and protect food products.

Mineral waters have been removed from the regulation's coverage as they were falling between two stools (the PDO/PGI rules and others).

The United States and other countries have challenged the EU's PGI rules in the World Trade Organisation. The Commission is mounting a vigorous defence, as improving food quality is central to the future prosperity of farmers. It is also in consumers' interests as they seek products with special quality characteristics such as specific geographical origins or particular production methods. The Commission does not want consumers to be misled, or that products named after their true origin be excluded from the market because geographical descriptions are used as trademarks. For example, Parma ham can be registered as a trademark in Canada and real Parma ham can then no longer be sold under its real name.

News in brief

□ Fourth ministerial conference on the protection of forests in Europe

The fourth ministerial conference on the protection of forests in Europe took place in Vienna between 28 and 30 April 2003. With the participation of 41 European countries and the European Community, the conference stressed the importance of forests and forestry for society and the commitment of Europe to the protection and sustainable management of our forests.

It was attended by Commissioner Fischler and resulted in the 'Vienna living forest summit declaration' and five resolutions signed by 40 European countries and the European Community.

Maintaining the health and vitality of forests is an important EU objective: their economic viability is vital for sustaining rural populations, while their environmental, social and cultural benefits are a definite social good.

The EU's forestry strategy is also increasingly influenced by broader cross-sectoral policies and global commitments, such as those agreed recently at the World Summit on Sustainable Development. So EU and Member State policies must address local and global issues.

The main aim of EU policies relevant to forests is thus to provide a platform for the promotion of sustainable forest management, adapted to European forest conditions. This is achieved, *inter alia*, by:

- aiding sustainable forest management through rural development measures;
- protecting forests and their biological diversity within the Natura 2000 network of protected areas and specific forest protection measures concerning airborne pollution and fires;
- working with accession countries under the Phare and Sapard programmes;
- encouraging the sustainable competitiveness of forest-based industries; and
- the conservation of forest genetic resources or the development of clean technologies, via research activities into areas such as carbon sequestration.

The Commission is preparing a report on the implementation of the EU's forestry strategy, first adopted in December 1998, which should be presented by the end of 2003.

