

Press Briefing - Brussels, 30 November 2005

Debate at Environment Council, 2 December: 'Next steps on GMOs'

Greenpeace outlines the urgent 'next steps' needed to protect public health and the environment

The UK Presidency has tabled a debate on GMOs for Friday's Environment Council (2 December). The discussion, "Next steps on GMOs", was requested by the governments of Luxembourg and Denmark, for different reasons. They will also vote on the authorisation of a GM maize.

Luxembourg has asked fellow EU ministers "to review together how to improve the terms and conditions of the decision-making process in order to improve its credibility and acceptability". Denmark wants the EU to "consider engaging actively in setting the global GMO-agenda by focussing on the use of GMOs for the broader benefit for society including in developing countries".

The debate follows two significant recent news items regarding GMOs:

- Revelations that mice fell ill as a result of eating a genetically modified pea in feeding trials in Australia (as reported in *New Scientist*, 26 November 2005).
- A vote by the Swiss population in favour of a five-year moratorium on growing GMOs.

The stories are a timely reminder of two issues which are central to the debate on GMOs in Europe, which EU ministers should consider: 1) the long-term threat of health risks associated with GM crops and the absence in Europe of the means to evaluate these risks, and 2) the strong public opposition to genetically modified crops and food among the European public.

The EU and food safety of GMOs

Lessons from Australia... Ten years of research into genetically modified peas was recently abandoned in Australia because a new study found serious health impacts in mice that were fed the modified peas. Eating the peas provoked lung inflammation in the mice and made them more sensitive to other food allergies. The study's results came as a surprise to the scientists working on the GM peas, because the problem was provoked by a bean gene that normally not present a health risk. The gene had been added to the peas to make them resistant to damage by the pea weevil insect. Unexpectedly, the genetic engineering process provoked a small change in the structure of the protein concerned, causing lung inflammation in the mice.

The peas had been grown in the open environment for several years, and Australian authorities (CSIRO) only stopped the field trial on publication of the scientific paper (16 November 2005).

This demonstrates why it is so important that GM crops are properly tested and are not released into the environment. It also shows that genetic engineering can lead to unexpected and detrimental effects on health, and not only the environment.

This case has serious implications for the EU, where the European Food Safety Authority's (EFSA) safety assessment of GM crops does not ask the sort of questions that were relevant in the case of the Australian peas.

In fact, feeding trials are not a legal requirement for GM crops in the EU.

A company that applies for permission to market its GMO in the EU is not required to submit comprehensive testing data, nor are test results subject to independent scrutiny.

Companies that conduct feeding trials have in the past attempted to withhold the test results on grounds of 'confidentiality'. This happened in the case of Monsanto's MON863 maize, which showed health impacts on rats. But no further investigations were conducted, and the EFSA dismissed the findings as 'not biologically relevant'. Only after a court action by Greenpeace was Monsanto obliged to make the full study public, on 20 June 2005. It is now being independently assessed. This has not prevented the European Commission from approving the import and sale of MON863 (for use in animal feed) on 8 August 2005, despite 14 out of 25 EU member states voting against. The final approval for MON863 for food uses is pending.

Environment ministers will also vote on Friday on the proposed authorisation of a hybrid of MON863 and another GM maize, MON810 – MON863xMON810. Variations in the data submitted for the authorisation of this hybrid were also dismissed by the EFSA.

Public mistrust

The approvals process for new GMOs has become a major issue of contention in the EU.

The 'comitology procedures' used to decide on GMO authorisations are characterised by a lack of transparency and openness. They leave all the power with the Commission, which can authorise GMOs while ignoring the views of citizens and a majority of Member States. Only a qualified majority of member states can stop it. *

According to the Luxembourg government: "criticism of the current decision-making process is an undeniable factor in continuing public mistrust, if not hostility, to GMOs and one of the reasons why the great majority of Member States continue to take a very cautious approach".

Recent authorisations of certain GMOs by the European Commission, with only minority support from member states and little public support, are an example of the democratic deficit in the EU decision-making process.

There is still no independent evaluation of GMOs in the EU. The EFSA only assesses data supplied by the applicant company. The Authority's scientific panels are unaccountable.

Greenpeace advises the following 'next steps on GMOs' for the EU:

1. A majority of member states should be able to block authorisations of GMOs.
2. The EU authorisation procedure for GMOs should be suspended and reviewed.
3. The implementation of the risk assessment requirements should be reviewed and the work of the EFSA re-organised to ensure transparency, the independent evaluation of GMOs, and the independence of its scientists from vested interests.
4. The Council should demand immediate measures to guarantee that the requirements of Directive 2001/18/EC be strictly respected by all GMO sectoral legislation.
5. All data related to risk assessment should be systematically and without delay accessible to the public.
6. Member States should demand that the Commission respect its own commitment to follow a 'predominant position' expressed in the Council.

For more information, please contact

Eric Gall, policy adviser on GMOs, Greenpeace European Unit, tel +32 2274 1906 or +32 496 161582, eric.gall@diala.greenpeace.org

Katharine Mill, media officer, Greenpeace European Unit, tel +32 2274 1903 or +32 496 156229, katharine.mill@diala.greenpeace.org

* The comitology procedure was established to allow the European Commission to rapidly approve adaptations to technical progress, once legislation was in place. It is not adapted to politically sensitive questions like GMO authorisations.