



*EU Environmental Policy Briefing**

European Parliament Draft Resolution on GMO Authorisation Procedures

26 January 2009

The Environment Council adopted conclusions outlining action on GMOs at its meeting on 4 December 2008, following an increased profile during 2008 surrounding the debate on the safety and authorisation of GMOs. Lithuanian socialist MEP Justas Vincas Paleckis, rapporteur to the European Parliament's Environment, Public Health and Food Safety Committee, has published a draft Resolution on the implementation of EU legislation on GMOs, in particular Directive 2001/18/EC and Regulations (EC) No 1829/2003 and 1830/2003, as the first stage of the European Parliament's response to the Council conclusions.

The draft resolution calls for greater harmonisation in authorisation procedures across Member States, particularly in relation to risk assessment, and for clarification and further legislation on labelling, GMO-free zones, and integrating GMOs with different farming methods. A central theme in the report concerns the need to increase public awareness and confidence in authorisation procedures, calling upon Member States and the Commission to launch information campaigns to allow the public to make informed decisions on GMO safety.

Delays and Indecision in the Authorisation Procedure

The draft resolution stresses the need for increased levels of transparency in GMO authorisation procedures at both the European and Member State level, especially with regards to environmental and health risk appraisals, in order to increase the public's confidence in the process.

Member States are called upon to 'assume their responsibilities' and commit to making decisions and voting on proposals during the authorisation procedure. Currently, the Commission presents its draft decisions on authorisations to the Standing Committee on the Food Chain and Animal Health – composed of representatives from all Member States. When qualified majorities (whether for or against) are not met by the Standing Committee, the draft decision must be taken to the European Council of Ministers and the European Parliament. If qualified majorities are not reached at this stage, as is usually the case, the Commission's draft

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decision comes into effect. This unilateral outcome is considered negative in the MEP's report.

Harmonisation of Environmental Risk Assessments

The report underlines the need for further harmonisation across Member States of the practices and methods used to assess the environmental risks of GMOs. Particular emphasis is placed on the need for risk assessments to consider the impact on non-target species and the potential long-term effects of GMOs, and specifically on the consequences of changes in the use of herbicides caused by herbicide-tolerant genetically modified plants. The report stresses that these points should be taken into consideration in the ongoing revision of the European Food safety Authority's (EFSA) guidelines on environmental evaluation, as required by the Commission and which is to be completed by March 2010¹. The draft resolution also calls upon the Commission and Member States to work more closely with the EFSA, specifically to increase Member State involvement in the risk assessment process, and for all parties to increase financial and human resources to assist the EFSA.

Inclusion of Socio-Economic Criteria Within Risk Assessments

Although environment ministers recognise the inherent difficulties of including socio-economic criteria within risk assessments, the conclusions from the Environment Council in December invited Member States to collect information by January 2010 on the socio-economic implications of placing GMOs on the market, and for the Commission to compile a report based on this information by June 2010 to enable further consideration and discussion^{1,2}. The draft resolution supports this proposal and proposes that the Commission and Member States should develop a methodological framework at EU level to take these socio-economic considerations into account in the risk management process, for the benefit of farmers and consumers, and for European agriculture and economic sectors generally.

Calls for Further Rules and Legislation

Some Member States have adopted national measures on the coexistence of GMOs with other forms of farming (i.e. conventional and organic), in accordance with the labelling requirements of Article 26a(1) of Directive 2001/18/EC, for example Germany, Denmark, Portugal and some Austrian Länder³. This is regarded as positive by the report and the remaining Member States are encouraged to follow suit as quickly as possible. The draft resolution states that coexistence rules should set clear provisions regarding liability for the indirect effects of GMO cultivation and imports, and invites the Commission to adopt a report on progress with the implementation of national measures as soon as possible.

The MEP's report also echoes calls from the December Environment Council to the Commission to adopt appropriate European labelling thresholds for the presence of GMO seeds in conventional seeds as soon as possible, noting 'deep concern' that no specific thresholds have yet been established, and stressing that levels should be set as low as possible³.

Under existing measures, GMO-free zones may be established for environmentally sensitive areas on the basis of a risk assessment or by means of a voluntary agreement between the economic operators within a determined area. The report calls for clarification from the Commission on the legal definition of GMO-free zones, and

stresses that in addition, Member States should be allowed to prohibit completely the cultivation of GMOs in certain geographical areas, for instance in Natura 2000 sites.

These calls for tighter legislation seem to add an extra layer of caution to the GMO debate.

Next steps

The draft report was considered at the European Parliament Environment, Public Health and Food Safety Committee meeting of 22 January, although minutes are not yet publicly available. The deadline for tabling amendments for the text is 26 January⁴, with the adoption of the Resolution by the Committee scheduled for 17 February, and in plenary on 11 March.

References

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3. DG Agri webpage, ‘Co-existence of genetically modified crops with conventional and organic farming’ http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/coexistence/index_en.htm
4. Draft report on the implementation of EU legislation on GMOs, in particular Directive 2001/18/EC and Regulations (EC) No 1829/2003 and 1830/2003 (2008/2306(INI)), accessible at http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2004_2009/documents/pr/759/759501/759501en.pdf
5. Draft agenda of ENVI Committee meeting 21 January, accessible at <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//NONSGML+COMPARL+ENVI-OJ-20090121-1+02+DOC+PDF+V0//EN&language=EN>

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