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French Press Coverage of Biotech Products

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Report Highlights:

Press coverage of biotech issues continues to be significant. The French popular press regularly reports on a growing opposition to transgenic plants in Europe and the United States. The French press also widely covered French companies' efforts to provide non-GMO soybeans to the poultry industry. In contrast, a study concluding that only 37 percent of French consumers effectively boycott food products containing genetically-altered ingredients did not receive much press coverage. Finally, there was almost no press coverage of the preliminary results of field trials performed in France concluding that transgenic rapeseed, sugar beets and corn have a limited impact on the environment.

Includes PSD changes: No
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Summary

Although the French press has recently been more focused on food safety issues such as listeria contamination and the BSE outbreak, press coverage of GMO issues remains significant. Since the beginning of the year, the French press has published several articles describing growing opposition to GMOs in both Europe and the United States. In addition, French companies' efforts to provide non-GMO soybeans to the poultry industry have been widely reported in the press. These are domestically-grown soybeans under the brand name "Soja de Pays" and soybeans imported from Brazil under strict controls. In contrast, an ongoing survey conducted by Government agencies and agricultural organizations, which concluded that only 37 percent of French consumers effectively boycott GMO-based products when purchasing foodstuffs, did not receive much coverage in the popular press. Finally, the preliminary results of field trials performed in France on GM rapeseed, corn and sugar beets received almost no press coverage, except in technical papers. The three-year trials concluded that gene transfers from GM varieties to the environment are limited.

1. French press claims that Opposition to Biotechnology is Growing

In February and March issues of daily economic newspapers and consumer/distributor magazines, some article titles were the following: "Anti-GMOs prepare an offensive in the United States," "GMOs: Refusal side is expanding," and "The wind is turning against GMOs."

These articles claimed that U.S. consumers have changed their minds on biotechnology and question their safety. The FDA's public hearings on biotech were organized to reassure consumers and to advise farmers to reduce their production of biotech products in 2000. In addition, the French press reported on a draft in Congress requiring labeling for genetically altered products in foodstuffs. Press articles emphasized some U.S. farmers' disappointment with technical results of biotech seeds and their dependence on companies supplying transgenic seeds. Finally, articles also described efforts by biotech opponents to convince shareholders to ask for an end to gene-altered food production and marketing.

The French press noted English distributors' ban on biotech products, and reported on the British Prime Minister's doubts on their safety in an interview published in *The Independent* just before the OECD conference on agro biotech in Edinburgh, Scotland.

Note: the protocol on biosafety negotiated in Montreal on January 29, 2000 was greeted by the French press as a victory for the EU and developing countries and a defeat for the United States and Canada, because the precautionary principle is now officially recognized in an international treaty.

2. French survey on the Feasibility of a non-GMO Sector in France

The French National Institute of Research in Agronomy (INRA) and the leading French farmers' union (FNSEA) launched a feasibility study on creating a non-biotech sector in France in April 1999. INRA and FNSEA are working with 45 other organizations, including farm producer associations, distributor associations, consumer organizations, the French Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, and the French Ministry of Economy and Finance. The budget for this project is FF 2.7 million (USD 439,000) and its final conclusions are expected to be released in December 2000.

Preliminary conclusions of the study were published in December 1999. A survey was done on consumer behavior regarding biotech products (in contrast to most other polls which have focused on consumer opinion). Conclusions are that there are three categories of consumers:

- (1) 37 percent boycott gene-altered food products: these consumers are very concerned about health and environment issues;
- (2) 34 percent purchase products containing genetically altered products if they are sold at lower prices (approximately 25 percent less) than non-biotech products: these consumers want lower prices either because they believe that the quality of transgenic products is lower than that of non-biotech products, or because the increase in profitability of growing transgenic crops needs to be shared;
- (3) 29 percent accept products containing agro biotech products without asking for lower prices, and 14 percent of these consumers are ready to pay more for biotech products: this "enthusiastic" group includes people who like organic products. They consider products containing gene-altered organisms and organic products as high-value products and are therefore ready to pay higher prices for both categories.

These conclusions were reported in the agricultural and food press, but not at all in the general press, which prefers to report on negative matters concerning biotech products. One should note that the percentage of people opposed to biotechnology is generally higher than the percentage of people informed about what genetically altered products are.

3. Two non-transgenic soybean sectors are organized in France

A. Development of French production of non-biotech soybeans called "Soja de Pays"

The French oilseed interprofessional organization (PROLEA), together with the feed and poultry companies GLON-SANDERS and BOURGOIN, created the "Soja de Pays" brand name in September 1999. Soybeans produced under this brand name, grown in France in environment-friendly conditions, are segregated from other soybeans along the entire length of the chain, from production, to processing, to animal feeding.

With 20,000 ha and 55,000 MT in 1999, "Soja de Pays" accounted for 20 percent of the total French soybean area and production. PROLEA's objective for 2000 is that the area planted to "Soja de Pays" double.

GLON SANDERS produces eggs under the band name MATINES which have been marketed with the "Soja de Pays" label since February. The price premium amounts to approximately 15 percent compared to regular eggs.

"Label Rouge" (MinAg's logo certifying high quality) chickens produced with "Soja de Pays" grown on 480 farms in the Gers region will be marketed for the first time in France in April 2000.

B. Non-biotech soybeans imported from Brazil

In late February, the French press widely covered the leading supermarket chain CARREFOUR's initiative to import non-biotech soybeans from Brazil under a system of strict traceability. These soybeans are grown in the Goias region by 850 producers and are traceable from fields to silos, trucks and crushing plants in Brazil, and to cargo ships importing the products into France by one of the leading French soybean importers SOULES CAF. Tests will be performed at the French port by the French organization SGS (Societe Generale de Surveillance), which will be in charge of certification and verification of the non-biotech status of the Brazilian soybean meal. Products will be certified as GMO-free if they contain less than 1 percent GMOs.

The first cargo is expected to arrive in the French port of Saint Nazaire in mid-April with 25,000 MT non-GMO soybean meal, as part of the total 180,000 MT that CARREFOUR plans to import in 2000. The non-GMO soybean meal will be used to feed layers, chickens and hogs for eggs, poultry and pork meat sold under the CARREFOUR brand name.

Two French "Label Rouge" chicken packers import non-biotech soybean meals from Brazil. DOUX recently imported 20,000 MT to feed its chickens sold under the "Janze." brand name, and "Poulets de Loue" is estimated to import 2,500 MT soybeans per month from Brazil.

4. French Field Trial Results on the Environmental Impact of Transgenic Crops

Several French agricultural technical institutes (including oilseeds, corn, sugar beet and other institutes) have conducted field trials in France since 1996 on the impact of GM crops on the environment. Results for 1996, 1997, and 1998 were recently published and are the following:

- (1) Rapeseed: transgenic rapeseed cross-breeds with neighbor non-GM rapeseed, but this pollen dispersion decreases when the distance to the plant-source increases, and varies according to the area and orientation of the plots, vectors (insects and wind), and whether the receiving plant is isolated or in a group. No interspecific hybrid was observed between rapeseed and wild mustard.

(2) Sugar beets: gene transfers from genetically altered sugar beets are limited by the fact that sugar beet varieties grown in France do not produce large quantities of pollen because graining is poor. In addition, the number of weed beets in the fields that may cross-breed with cultivated sugar beets is low because weed beets are destroyed by non-selective herbicides, and gene transfer from GM sugar beets is therefore likely to occur with weed beets outside of fields. Gene flow is also limited by the lower competitiveness of cultivated beets' pollen compared to weed beets' pollen, and declines with the distance to the source.

(3) Corn: Bt corn varieties have shown a very good resistance to the corn borer, although resistance varies according to the type of genetic modification. Corn borers present in fields planted to Bt corn have not shown a higher resistance to the Bt toxin than corn borers present in fields planted to regular corn.