



USDA Foreign Agricultural Service

GAIN Report

Global Agriculture Information Network

Template Version 2.09

Voluntary Report - public distribution

Date: 6/22/2005

GAIN Report Number: FR5045

France

Biotechnology

Test Plot Destructions Stopped, Activists change tactics

2005

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Report Highlights:

Test plot destructions planned by anti-biotech activists for June 18 were stopped by tight security and police protection. The thwarted activists quickly organized a number of community-based meetings to get their message across. The French planting seed industry used the date to clarify their positions on coexistence and on changes in the French evaluation process for biotech crops.

Includes PSD Changes: No
Includes Trade Matrix: No
Unscheduled Report
Paris [FR1]
[FR]

June 18th was meant to be a national anti-biotech day in France (see Paris reports FR5041 dated 6/15/05 and FR5030 dated 4/18/05). Activist José Bové called for wide spread biotech test plot destructions in protest of the Government of France's support (although timid) of biotech research. However, tight security around test plots and the support of local and national police forced the activists to change tactics. They opted for local level public education through hastily organized press events. The French planting seed industry also organized a press conference on June 16th to explain their positions on a number of biotech policy issues.

1. The Police Prevented Test Plots Destructions – Activists Switched to public education

Every summer for the past few years, activists (Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, and the Confederation Paysanne farmers union) have conducted a campaign of biotech test plot destructions. On June 18, 2005, however, both biotech companies and the police were well prepared (see FR5041).

On June 18, 2005, the police prevented two actions of destruction from happening. The first one close to Toulouse (Southwestern France), where 200 demonstrators gathered in front of the French pro-biotech planting seed company Euralis and then tried to sow a biotech test plot with organic seeds. In this case, they were stopped by the police. The second attempt was Auvergne (Center of France), where a large number of biotech test plots are located, because of the local cooperative Limagrain and its subsidiaries Biogemma and Meristem Therapeutics. The vigilance of the police also stopped demonstrators in this case.

The Activists had anticipated these problems and had oriented their strategies to education: they conducted a number of local meetings in several French regions, informing the public of their views on biotechnology.

2. The Planting Seed Industry Takes Position on Biotech Policy Issues

On June 16, French planting seed organizations (CFS and GNIS) and the crop protection industry organization (UIPP) held a press conference to explain their official positions on a number of biotech policy issues.

On coexistence, they opposed the recommendation made last April by the biotech Parliamentary working group (see Paris report FR5030, dated 4/18/05). The Parliamentary working group recommended that biotech growers take responsibility for cross contamination based on adventitious presence thresholds. The French planting seed industry considers discriminatory against farmers growing biotech crops. In addition, GNIS believes coexistence rules can be set only if the same threshold of 0.9 percent is used at every step of the process (from planting seeds to processing food).

On the evaluation process for new biotech products, the French planting seed industry supports one biotech committee made up of the Commission du Genie Genetique, Commission du Genie Biomoleculaire, and Comite de Biovigilance. This one biotech committee would include a scientific group and a soci-economic group, as proposed by the Parliamentary working group.

These industry announcements come as the French Government is finalizing its Biotech Law. The test of the new is to be analyzed by the French Conseil d'Etat, which is in charge of examining the texts of laws before they are presented for vote to the French Parliament (the Conseil d'Etat reviews new laws and makes sure they are compatible with the

Constitution and with already existing laws). The biotech law is expected to include the transposition of EU Directive 2001/18, national rules on coexistence, and a new evaluation procedure for biotech products. A French Parliament vote is expected in October 2005. If the EU Directive 2001/18 is not transposed into French law by October 2006, France will have to pay penalties set by the European Court of Justice.