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Biotechnology

Biotech Update

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Report Highlights:

On November 27, the Hungarian Parliament approved the country's "coexistence regulation" (Amendment of the Act on Gene Technology Activities). The deliberations in the Parliament spurred pro-biotech and opponents alike into active discussions and activities. With the new regulation Hungary imposed a "de facto" ban on biotech production due to neighbor consent requirements and excessive isolation distances. However, biotech opponents and advocates alike emphasize the country's need for biotechnology research. The updated text of the amended Act and the Department level application orders are to be publicized later in December. Hungary's moratorium on the MON810 varieties was extended by a September decision in Brussels. However the next Council of Environmental Ministers may vote it down in December.

Includes PSD Changes: No
Includes Trade Matrix: No
Unscheduled Report
Vienna [AU1]
[HU]

The atmosphere around the coexistence debate in the Hungarian Parliament changed significantly this autumn:

- In September, the Regulatory Committee of the European Union DG for Environment voted against removing Hungary's ongoing moratorium on MON810 varieties.
- The Hungarian green, consumer, and biotech skeptic groups became more active as a result of the large political demonstrations taking place in October in Budapest. The politicians of the governing coalition sponsored an "anti-GMO" rally in order to avoid confrontation with the opposition and due to the divided opinions on biotechnology in their own camp.
- Coexistence, and the broader biotechnology-GMO question, received considerable publicity in October-November. Numerous meetings, seminars, and other activities revealed the complexity of the public opinions in Hungary in this issue.

Farmers' Forum on Crop Varieties Bred by Gene Technology (GM), Budapest, Hungarian Academy of Science, October 21, 2006

The forum generated high interests. The estimated number of the audience was about 160. About the half of the participants were farmers, farm organization members, traders, and scientists. Representatives of government offices and politicians (MPs) were also present.

The presentations covered the role of the gene technology in plant breeding; the present and future of the bio-industry; opinions of Hungarian and Czech farmers; the risk assessment of GM food; the integrated pest management and the BT corn; the users competition for corn. The speakers stressed the potential benefits of the gene technology to combat new pests (corn root bug), the more arid weather in the future, and in stabilizing yields, and breeding "functional" plants.

The representative of Association of Agricultural Cooperatives and Farms criticized the producer liability and neighbor consent formulas in the draft coexistence regulation (CR), as well as the unnecessarily big isolation distances prescribed between the fields of GM and conventional crops.

At the same time, opponents outlined the negative consumer acceptance of biotechnology products, the possible loss of Hungary's established export markets for bio (organic) products, biotech-free corn, and planting seeds.

Open Day at the Parliament on "The Agricultural Gene Technology – First Generation GM Plants" November 22, 2006

The conference was organized by the Agricultural and the Environmental Committee of the Parliament and several NGOs. About 650 people were present including Members of the Parliament, representatives of government organizations, scientific organizations, and universities. The whole-day was very well organized. However the scientists active in biotechnology, as well as the biotechnology industry were under-represented. The level of presentations was uneven ranging from very sophisticated discussions on biology, ecology, and/or legal issues to discussion of esoteric nonsense and anti-capitalist slogans.

The Amendment of the XXVII/1998 Act on the Gene Technology activities

The Parliament approved the amended Act on November 27.

The most debated provisions of the CR were the prior written consent requirements of all landowners and land users of the neighboring parcels and the big isolation distances required between biotech and conventional or organic crop fields.

The Commission stressed that written permission from the neighboring farmers prior to planting a biotech variety is not a civil liability requirement during its review of Hungary's draft CR. Other Member States of the EU require only notification or coordination with neighbors. The written permit means a "de facto" ban on biotech crop production because parcels owned by individual holders are small in Hungary and due to the system of the early 1990's Cooperative Land Re-privatization program, larger fields often belong to joint (undivided) property of many proprietors. The majority of agricultural land is cultivated by medium or large size farms under long time contracts. These farmers need to make an agreement with not only the numerous owners of neighboring fields, but the users of these fields as well, supposing the two are not the same. Some large scale agricultural corporations which lease state owned land may be in the position to try the new technology. However, supposing that the Government of Hungary, as a proprietor, approves it.

The isolation distance set by the CR for corn is 400 meter, more than double of the distance used in hybrid seed propagation worldwide and much larger than the required isolation in Member States already producing biotech crops. According to the calculation of a seed firm, in case of a 400-meter isolation for a 100 hectare rectangular field, only 4 hectares of biotech corn could be planted. Or if an average 30-hectare field was planted with biotech corn, then the 152 hectares surrounding it should be planted with other crops than corn.

The Decision # 1393 of the Parliament

In tandem with the coexistence legislation, the Hungarian Parliament (HP) approved a Decision (H/1393) "On some questions and the Hungarian strategy concerning the gene technology activities, and its application in food production".

A Parliament Decision contains general opinions, arguments and tasks for the Government but it has no heavy legislative weight. However, this paper evidences the divided opinions in Hungary. The opponents of green biotechnology support biotechnology research until it conflicts with their environmental and consumer concerns. The pragmatic agricultural lobby advocates the importance of biotechnology science, but they do not have strong arguments against the prevailing "GMO-free" country stance.