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## Lithuania

### Biotechnology

### Biotechnology Policy and Public Opinion

**2007**

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**Report Highlights:**

Lithuania is divided in its opinion on biotechnology's use in agriculture. About 60 percent of the population has a negative attitude toward the technology. The government position varies, voting for a new genetically modified (GM) potato in the EU at the end of 2006, while disapproving field trials of GM rapeseed in April 2007.

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## Executive Summary

Lithuania is divided in its opinion on biotechnology's use in agriculture. About 60 percent of the population has a negative attitude toward the technology. The government position varies, voting for a new genetically modified (GM) potato in the EU at the end of 2006, while disapproving field trials of GM rapeseed in April 2007. Countrywide there is much greater acceptance of the use of GM varieties for industrial purposes, such as potatoes for starch production and crops for production of biomass and biofuel.

## Lithuanian Process for Biotechnology Policy Setting and Decision Making

Lithuania formalized its regulatory and decision making process for biotechnology in 2003 after five years of development. The Ministries of Health, Economy, Agriculture all have a voice in Lithuania's biotechnology policies and regulations with the Ministry of Environment having the final word on any such decisions.

Two committees provide input into the government's decision-making process. The participants on both committees are nominated and accepted in an inter-Ministry process. The Advisory Committee makes recommendations directly to the Ministry of Environment. It is a policy-level committee comprised of 20 voting members and up to 10 additional non-voting observers. These members include representatives from Government Ministries, such as the Ministry of Health, Environment and the State Veterinary Service, and non-government organizations such as Greenpeace, and universities. Members usually have a scientific background or hold an influential position in their organization. Currently there are no farm group representatives on the Advisory Committee. The Scientific Committee is comprised of technical experts currently working in laboratories or teaching institutions. They meet as requested by the Advisory Committee to provide scientific opinions on a variety of issues.

After reaching a consensus opinion, the Advisory Committee presents its recommendation to the Ministry of Environment, and the Ministry uses that information at its discretion and develops a recommendation to be circulated to the other Ministries for feedback. Once their opinions are solicited and considered, the Ministry of Environment makes the final decision. A wide range of policies are developed using this process including co-existence regulations, field trial approvals, and opinions on upcoming EU Committee votes concerning biotechnology.

## National Scientific Research in Biotechnology

Lithuania has a history of biotechnology research. Its Institute of Biotechnology, which was founded as the Institute of Enzymology during Soviet times, continues research on a wide range of pharmacological and plant research. Current research on cold resistance in plants has begun, with hopes for potential use in industrial crops for biofuels (though the research could result in discoveries for general application). The Institute of Enzymology also created Fermentas, a private company currently researching and producing enzymes for use in industrial production, specifically primers for polymer chain reactions. In addition, both Vilnius University and Kaunas University offer courses in the latest developments and techniques used in biotechnology research.

## The Current Environment for Biotechnology's Use in Agriculture

### *Government:*

Lithuania had shown some promising signs in terms of its position on biotechnology. For example, in an EU Committee vote held December 2006, Lithuania voted for the approval of a potato developed to produce a type of starch for paper production. In addition, in 2007 the Ministry of Environment embarked on a yearlong biotechnology education and outreach program directed at a wide range of interested groups. However, the government rejected the application for GM field trials in April 2007 and despite the recent positive vote for a new GM variety of potato, government officials and committee members predict that it is likely that Lithuania will vote against any biotechnology varieties that are to be used in food production in future EU Committee votes.

In October 2006 BASF applied for a permit to field test GM rapeseed in Lithuania. On April 4, 2007 the Ministry of the Environment decided against issuing the permit despite the fact that the Biotechnology Advisory and Scientific Committees reviewed and recommended approving such trials. The government noted that in making its decision it took into account public opinion, opinions of relevant institutions and the effect on the environment in making its decision. Various representatives of "green" organizations lobbied aggressively against the field trial. Monsanto has also requested approval for GM (Roundup Ready) corn field trials, but this application is still in the initial committee stages and a decision will not be reached before fall 2007.

Lithuania's draft co-existence regulations, which currently contain quite onerous registration and documentation requirements, are still being discussed by Lithuania and the European Union. These regulations were reported on in detail in GAIN report, EN6001. This report can be found on the internet site [www.fas.usda.gov](http://www.fas.usda.gov) by selecting Attaché Reports.

This year the Ministry of Environment is planning an aggressive public awareness and educational outreach program on biotechnology. Based on discussions with the organizers we believe the sessions will be scientifically based and will provide a balanced view on the technology. The targeted groups include teachers, farmers, politicians and legislators, as well as consumer groups. In mid-February 2007, the first of these programs took place just outside of Vilnius. The program was designed to explain the science and its current uses and was directed to government officials, consumer groups and the interested general public. A variety of scientists led these seminars followed by question and answer sessions and open discussion. Several post-seminar discussions were positive toward the technology, although representatives from environmental organizations expressed their opposition to the technology in any form. In April 2007, the Ministry will hold an educational seminar specifically designed for the members of parliament. In addition, in mid-April a risk assessment seminar on biotechnology will be offered to interested scientists. Several more outreach sessions will be planned throughout the summer and fall.

### *Public opinion and interested groups:*

Most (59 percent) of the Lithuanians surveyed in early 2007 stated that they are against the use of GMOs in general and over 60 percent are against GM planting in Lithuania.<sup>1</sup> There are some individuals in Lithuania who acknowledged the benefits, with about 30 percent saying that the technology could help producing more food and alleviating starvation, and about 20 percent agreeing that GMOs were important for scientific advancement. The population

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<sup>1</sup> The survey was conducted in early 2007 at the Fonetel call center and was commissioned by the Ministry of Environment. It consisted of 1,000 Lithuanians over the age of 18 throughout the country.

trusts scientists' opinion on the technology more than any other group such as farmers, the government and environmental organizations.

A previous EU-wide study<sup>2</sup> found that 56 percent of Lithuanians think that food produced from genetically modified organisms was dangerous, in contrast to 11 percent who thought it was safe and 33 percent who did not know or were neutral. This rate is slightly more negative than the overall EU rate of 54 percent who believed the food was dangerous, though much less negative than their neighbor Latvia. In Latvia about 70 percent of the population stated that GM foods were dangerous. In general, there is a lack of knowledge about biotechnology's use in food production among the general population and in the most recent survey almost 70 percent of Lithuanians say that they do not consume any food derived from GMOs.

Farm groups in Lithuania are not as influential as they are in neighboring Poland, but the most influential farm group in Lithuania is a green-farm coalition and they are vocally anti-biotech. They express their desire to keep Lithuania "GMO-free." There are other smaller local farm groups who are interested in future use of the technology, but are not as well organized. The vast majority of Lithuanian scientists recognize the potential benefits of the biotechnology, but it has no vocal domestically based interest group or organization promoting use of the technology.

The "green" parties in the Baltics, particularly Estonia and Lithuania are regaining popularity and are actively anti-biotechnology. The parties lost almost all of their seats in parliament in the Baltics in the early 1990's as the focus became rebuilding their economies. However, focus on global climate change and in part concerns about GMO's have helped their resurgence. For example, the Estonian Greens won almost 7 percent of the votes in the early 2007 parliamentary election. The green parties are becoming increasingly vocal in Lithuania as evidenced by their effort to lobby the government and public against permitting any field trials of biotech crops.

### **Post comment and outlook**

Based on meetings with a variety of officials, we expect that Lithuania will vote against any approvals of new varieties of GM crops particularly those for use in food or feed in European Union Committees. In addition, because of its geography and climate, it is unlikely that the GM seed varieties currently approved for use in the EU have great potential in Lithuania. Lithuania is a significant producer of wheat and barley, but only about 17 percent of its total production area is planted with crops that have commercially viable GM varieties (7%-rape; 6%-potatoes; 3%-beets; 1%-corn) and of these, only biotech corn varieties are approved for planting in the EU. As mentioned above, future GM varieties for industrial uses, such as use of GM crops for biofuel production have more potential for acceptance and widespread use.

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<sup>2</sup> The source is a 2004 Eurobarometer survey number 224.