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Germany

Biotechnology

German Genetech Law - Coalition Compromise

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Report Highlights:

The German genetech law is expected to be only marginally amended despite an almost two year intensive discussion process. The minimum distance for biotech corn to neighboring conventional corn will be set at 150 meters and at 300 meters for organic corn. Rules for 'without-genetech' labeling are expected to be eased.

Includes PSD Changes: No
Includes Trade Matrix: No
Unscheduled Report
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Coalitions Compromise on the Draft the Genetech Law

On Friday July 20 the German Coalition partners Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) and Social Democrats (SPD) agreed on a number of essential points about how to proceed with the remodeling of the existing genetech law. The coalition compromise actually represents pretty much a status quo of the existing law with some marginal adjustments.

The result of the agreement is that the biotech pessimists succeeded in a number of points:

- The German liability regulation will not be changed.
- The rules for the field register remain untouched.
- The distance requirement for biotech fields to conventional crops will be set at 150 meters.
- The distance of biotech fields to organic fields will be set at 300 meters.
- Farmers will have the opportunity to conclude private agreements that the distance can be cut shorter or totally eliminated. However, the consequence for the agreeing neighboring farmer is that he has to label his crop as biotech corn if biotech traces below 0.9 percent will be detected because this is no longer unintentional presence.
- The German Laender (States) have the option to implement stricter distance rules for biotech fields within or neighboring nature reserve regions. This option also applies to fields neighboring seed production fields.

Another important point is that political pressure has built during recent months to make it easier to label food with the term 'without genetechology'. Minister Seehofer agreed to draft an amendment that would broaden the option that German food processors can label livestock products - stretching from milk, eggs, meat to processed products – as 'without genetechology' if the animals were not fed with biotech feeds. The use of feed additives and enzymes and medicine derived from biotechnology processes does not prevent the 'without genetechology' labeling. So far the 'without genetechology' labeling is not possible if animals have been treated with biotech medicine or fed with feed which contained additives or enzymes which got in touch with biotech.

The result of the intended change of the labeling rule might be that an increasing amount of food products will be labeled 'without genetechology' and demand for biotech-free crops will increase. So far hardly any products were labeled 'without genetechology'.

The new draft version of the biotech law has been forwarded to the stakeholders for comment by July 31. On August 8, the law will be sent to the Bundestag and on August 10 it will be sent to the Bundesrat. On September 21 the Bundesrat will take action on the genetech law amendment.

Reactions to the Coalition Compromise on the Genetech Law Proposal

The Social Democrats (SPD) praise the coalition compromise as a victory of their interventions at the Seehofer ministry. The SPD argues that the new draft reflects the interest of the vast majority of German people opposing biotech in food and feed production. The SPD claims that the intend to alter the labeling rules for livestock products resulting from animals, which were fed with biotech feeds, are an important step towards more truthful information of the consumers although the livestock can still be fed with biotech additives, enzymes or treated with biotech medicine. The use of additives, enzymes, medication or other substances, which results from biotechnological processes, is disregarded by the SPD.

The Green Party complains that the option that neighboring farmers can lower the minimum distance to neighboring fields resembles the invitation to unlimited biotech crop production. Additionally the Greens demand that the buffer distance should be 300 meters to all non-biotech fields.

The German farmers association claims that they cannot recommend growing of biotech crops in Germany because of the unsatisfactory and unchanged liability rules. However, a leading ag-policy speaker of the Christian Democrats party claims that liability regulations are relatively insignificant for the growing of corn under the condition of minimum distances of 150 meters and more.

Minister Seehofer defends the compromise as a balanced response to public concerns about biotechnology. Seehofer repeatedly stated that he supports research on biotech crops but that there is no need for the growing of biotech crops for food and feed purposes. The breakthrough for biotech crops will possibly come with the next generation of biotech traits concentrating on energy crops. For this purposes Germany announced the founding of a national research center for biomass – Deutsches Biomasse-Forschungszentrum (DBFZ). About 80 researchers will concentrate on the replacement of mineral oil through biomass. Asked why Seehofer does not support biotech in the way as it was announced by Chancellor Merkel, Seehofer responded: “We do not make politics on a different planet; we are concerned about the opinion of our farmers, churches and youth groups.” (Quote in the Frankfurter Rundschau).