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## Czech Republic

### Biotechnology

### Biotech Conference in Prague

### 2007

**Approved by:**

Quintin Gray  
AGPrague

**Prepared by:**

Petra Hrdlickova

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**Report Highlights:**

Prague was the site for several biotechnology events over the past two months: A biotech conference organized by FAS/Vienna/Prague and the State Department; a United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) GMO workshop for Eastern Europe; a United Nations Environment (UNEP)/Global Environmental Fund (GEF) biotech seminar; and a meeting of Czech NGOs with biotech regulators. This report provides an overview of those events.

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## U.S. Embassy Conference: Biotechnology in Modern Agriculture, Food, and Industry

On September 12, 2007, the FAS Offices in Vienna and Prague and the State Department at U.S. Embassy/Prague organized a conference entitled "Biotechnology in Modern Agriculture, Food, and Industry", which was followed by a dinner for policy-makers hosted by Ambassador Richard Graber.

The purpose of the conference was to provide science-based information to policy makers, farmers, food processors and consumer advocates and to highlight the recent WTO ruling on biotechnology. By organizing a conference on the positive Czech biotech experience, FAS and State attempted to strengthen the Czech position in the EU and to encourage science-based biotechnology policies in the region.

The conference, locally co-sponsored by the Czech Ministry of Agriculture, drew over 70 participants from five countries, including representatives from government, retail and food industry, academia, as well as the local English and Czech press.

Ambassador Graber gave opening remarks at the conference, explaining the importance of biotechnology in the United States and the opportunities biotechnology provides to address poverty and food security issues on a global scale. Among the keynote speakers were Mr. Fred Yoder, a farmer from the United States (Ohio), and Professor Mr. Yoder Richard Phipps from the University of Reading in the United Kingdom.

Mr. Yoder talked from the farmer's perspective about his experience with growing GM crops in the US, new GM varieties grown in the US, and their co-existence with organic production. He also touched on labeling requirements and pointed out that organic products may not be labeled as "GMO free" as is often the case in Europe. Mr. Yoder also appeared on the popular morning talk show "Dobre Rano" with Czech Ministry of Agriculture representative Marie Cerovska to talk about the benefits of biotechnology.

Dr. Phipps talked about the use of biotechnology in food production, global trends in the world including climate change and the need for new technologies. He stressed the safety of biotechnology and pointed out conclusions from regulatory authorities in the UK that there is no scientific evidence indicating that milk, meat and eggs produced by animals fed biotech crops would be any different than products derived from conventional agriculture. He talked about global GM crop areas and the benefits of biotechnology in the world.

Attendees at the dinner included Czech Minister of Agriculture Petr Gandalovic, Deputy Minister of Environment Dr. Karel Blaha and Deputy Chairman of the Czech Parliament Agriculture Committee Ladislav Skopal, along with representatives from leading agricultural organizations. Ambassador Graber congratulated the Czech Republic on its leadership role in agricultural biotechnology in Europe and led a discussion on current challenges and the future of biotechnology in Europe. Minister Gandalovic was forthright in discussing the difficulties EU membership presents with regard to biotechnology but noted the Czech government and parliament will continue to support a science-based approach to biotechnology.

### **FAO Workshop: "Risk Assessment and Management of GM Crops"**

On October 13-27, 2007, the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) hosted a seminar entitled "Risk Assessment and Management of GM Crops". The target audience was the following Eastern European countries: Bulgaria, Romania, Georgia, Armenia,

Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Serbia, Belarus, Kosovo, Moldova, Kazakhstan, Turkey, Ukraine, and Russia. The workshop's goal was to provide balanced information about various countries' experiences with biotech crops, risk analysis and assessment as well as to share the experiences of the workshop participants' countries in issues and differences in risk assessment among the countries.

The Czech Republic, as the host country, provided several experts to speak about risk analysis and risk assessment and regulations in the European Union. A representative of the European Food Safety Agency (EFSA) gave an overview of EFSA's strategy and role in relation to assessment of GMOs. Among the key topics of the workshop were risk assessment and management of insect-resistant GM crops, virus-resistant GM crops, herbicide-resistant GM crops; food safety assessment and Codex Alimentarius guidelines.

There was a general discussion on common issues and differences in risk assessment among the countries and several plenary sessions for smaller group discussions. Participants also visited a laboratory at the State Agricultural and Food Inspection in Brno, which is the monitoring and enforcement authority for GMO and genetic products in the Czech Republic. The group also visited Johann Gregor Mendel, founder of the genetics museum in Brno.

### **United Nations Environment (UNEP)/Global Environmental Fund (GEF) seminar entitled "Genetic Modifications and Measures for Biological Safety"**

On October 8, 2007, the Ministry of Environment hosted a seminar "Genetic Modifications and Measures for Biological Safety."

The seminar was organized for the public. The main topics included: Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety – an overview of the UNEP/GEF project, inspection controls done by the Czech Inspection of Environment, trans-boundary movement of GMOs, overview of GM crops in the world and their safety, GMO legislation valid in the Czech Republic, control of GMO handling in the Czech Republic, GM food and feed, and rules of coexistence in biotechnology.

### **Biotechnology and Sustainable Development Viewed by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)**

On October 9, 2007, Society for Sustainable Life, a Czech NGO, hosted a public meeting with biotech regulators from the Ministry of Environment and the Ministry of Agriculture. The seminar was attended by 40 people, including the Minister of Environment Bursik's "green advisor".

The main topics included: experiences of NGOs with biotechnologies in the world, GMO risk assessment, its impact on health and environment, conflicting interests of organic and biotech farmers, rules of coexistence etc. A representative of the Ministry of Agriculture reported on new EU regulation 834/2007 on organic agriculture, which will come into force on January 1, 2009. The new rule of this regulation is that organic producers will not be fined if their products contain less than 0.9% of GMO. This information upset the organic farmers and representatives of the Society for Sustainable Life and resulted in a very emotional debate among organic farmers and representatives of the Ministry of Agriculture. NGOs repeatedly said that they agree with different types of agriculture (organic, conventional, and biotech) as long as one group of farmers (biotech) does not cause harm to another group (organic), which apparently does if organic products may contain up to 0.9% of GMO. The Ministry of Agriculture representative pointed out that GM crops have been

approved in the EU and that they have to provide conditions for both parts. The two sides reached no agreement.