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France

Biotechnology

GOF Action on Biotech - One-Year Overview

2008

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Report Highlights:

The current French government, in power over the past year, has been significantly less open to agricultural biotechnology than its predecessors. Under the lead of the Ministry of Environment, the GOF has taken a number of policy initiatives which have endangered the future of agricultural biotechnology. First, France banned MON810 production in December 2007 (which pending its reevaluation by EU authorities was grown on 22,000 ha in 2007). Second, a new biotech bill adopted in May 2008 mandated transparency through public disclosure of biotech fields planted for commercial production at the plot level, and reorganized the authority evaluating genetically-engineered products, to include not only scientists but also a socio-economic committee. Finally, France is actively trying to move its socio-economic evaluation to the European level, in anticipation of initiating changes during its Presidency of the European Union in the second half of 2008.

Includes PSD Changes: No
Includes Trade Matrix: No
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President Sarkozy's government (formed one year ago) has been significantly less open to agricultural biotechnology than its predecessors. While the French Ministry of Agriculture used to be the leader on this issue, the powerful Ministry of Environment now leads the agenda on biotechnology.

French Domestic Biotech Policy:

Since mid 2007, the Environment Ministry has spearheaded a number of policy initiatives which have endangered the future of agricultural biotechnology. First, following a national environmental debate (the so-called "Grenelle for the Environment"), the authority evaluating biotech products was reorganized to include socio-economic representatives as well as scientists. Second, this new authority reevaluated MON810, the only biotech corn variety authorized and grown for commercial production in France, and found "serious doubts" about its safety. Based on this conclusion, the GOF initiated a safeguard clause freezing cultivation of MON810 in January, 2008.

Following months of tense fractious political discussions and frictions between the French government and Parliament, France passed a new biotech bill on May 22, 2008. The bill, which includes 14 articles, transposes EU Directives on the use of genetically engineered products, creates a new biotech authority (High Committee for Biotechnology), establishes technical conditions for producing biotech crops through a new coexistence framework, and sets harsher penalties for biotech crop destructions. France is one of the last member states to finally transpose these EU Directives and did so to avoid costly fines from the EU.

The bill theoretically guarantees French farmers and consumers the right to produce and consume with or without GMOs. However, the passage of this legislation is only the first step of many that will be required to establish a legal framework on biotech in France, as implementing decrees are required and expected in the next few months. First, the new High Committee for Biotechnology, created by the law, needs to be established. Its composition is expected to be controversial as it will include both a scientific committee and a socio-economic committee. This Committee will likely mirror the Interim Committee put in place temporarily after the "Grenelle" environmental consultations organized last fall. The Interim Committee's evaluation of MON810 led the GOF to impose a national ban on MON810 planting until its reevaluation by European authorities, which is still pending.

The decrees implementing the bill will have to be prepared and published in the French Official Journal. Of high interest will be the decrees detailing biotech and non-biotech crop coexistence measures, such as cropping distances, that will be prepared by the French Ministries of Agriculture and Environment. These implementing decrees will influence, to a great extent, the economic viability of biotech crops in France.

No Biotech Production in France in 2008:

Despite the completion of the biotech bill, many uncertainties remain, and recent events have generated added insecurity among consumers towards genetically engineered (GE) products, while farmers are uncertain whether they will have access to GE seeds next year.

No GE crop production will take place in France in 2008, and no open-field experiments are expected to be approved for new GE crop varieties. While the French Minister of Agriculture had officially announced open-field test plots would be authorized in 2008, to date, there has been no administrative authority formed to approve proposals. Thus, it is expected that only approvals to renew multi-year trials will be provided.

Prospects for the future of commercial biotech cultivation in France are uncertain at best. French production of MON810 had boomed in previous years, (22,000 hectares in 2007 from 500 hectares in 2005) mainly due to the extremely positive agronomic and economic results experienced by corn farmers.

French Policy at the EU level:

Under the Sarkozy government, France has voted negatively or abstained on new biotech product approvals at the EU level. This contrasts with the French position under former governments which were generally science-based and positive. France's attitude, together with that of several other member states, has contributed to the slow adoption of new biotech products.

This results in asynchronous authorizations between the EU and countries producing biotech seeds/crops, including the United States. While, to date, asynchronous authorizations have mainly concerned corn products, they are likely to expand to soybean products in the near future. While France no longer imports corn products from the United States, it does import large quantities of soybeans and soybean meal from the United States and South America. The imbalance in authorizations in conjunction with a zero tolerance level for GMO imports not approved in Europe has had a chilling effect on potential buyers of U.S. agricultural feed ingredients.

In addition, France intends to export its GE evaluation framework as a model for the EU, during its presidency of the European Union in the second half of 2008. As a prominent Member State that many others closely monitor, its recent retreat on biotech endangers the future of farm biotechnology EU-wide. For example, there is a recognition that France is trying to move its socio-economic biotech evaluation to the European level, placing the European Food Safety Agency's science-based work at risk.