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# GAIN Report

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## Italy

### Biotechnology

### Italy approves GM Field Trials

### 2008

**Approved by:**

Jim Dever  
U.S. Embassy

**Prepared by:**

Sandro Perini

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**Report Highlights:**

Italy's has approved the resumption of biotech field trials after a hiatus of 10 years. Protocols for nine crops were approved but leave implementing regulations up to the regions—many of which have declared themselves to be GMO free. While the approval of these protocols may be a positive step, most Italian scientists remain skeptical about their actual significance. In their view, too many constraints exist to make field tests practical. In fact, many research centers have abandoned agricultural biotechnology research because there is little likelihood that any farm in Italy will be able to benefit from such research any time soon.

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"A glimmer opens, after ten years of darkness, for field trials of biotech crops." This is how a leading farm weekly magazine, "Agrisole" starts its press release, announcing the approval of the biotech field test protocols by the State-Regions Conference—a special body of representatives from the federal government and each of the 20 Italian regions that addresses issues of mutual interest. The path to this approval has not been easy. For a number of years, both public and private institutions have not been allowed to conduct research on biotech crops in Italy. By law, approval must first come from a special committee of ten members, comprised of two representatives from the Ministry of Agriculture, two from the Ministry of Environment, and six from the regions, followed by approval of the State-regions Conference.

In 2007, the Ministry of Agriculture passed a Ministerial decree, endorsed by the special committee, approving protocols to re-start biotech field trials, which had been stopped for a number of years. But the decree was opposed by the Minister of Environment, Alfonso Pecoraro Scanio, who also was the leader of Italy's Green party. Last August, the new Minister of Environment, Stefania Prestigiacomo, endorsed the above protocols, which were then approved by the State-Regions Conference. The Ministerial decree is now waiting for the final signature from Minister of Agriculture Zaia, after which it will be published in the Official Gazette. Although Zaia has publicly maintained a strong opposition to agricultural biotechnology, most observers expect him to sign the decree.

Nine protocols were approved; one each for kiwis, citrus, sweet cherries, strawberries, corn, egg plants, olives, tomatoes, and grapes. The decree leaves it up to each region to develop implementing regulations, including the authority to adopt even more restrictive measures than the original protocols in order "to reduce the risk of contamination." Although most Italian regions have declared themselves to be "GM-free," some regions appear open to the biotech trials, including Lombardy, Veneto, and Emilia-Romagna—all located in northern Italy.

The nine protocols all include stringent measures to prevent any "contamination" to conventional agriculture. Examples of these measures include the required use of anti-birds nets over GM kiwi-trees, a minimum distance of 1,000 meters between biotech and conventional corn fields, hand harvesting of biotech corn, and, in some cases, sterilization of the soil and incineration of the residues. Furthermore the trial fields must remain idle for up to three years following the trials.

While the approval of these protocols may be seen by many pro-biotech observers as a positive step, most Italian scientists remain skeptical about the actual significance of this decree. In their view, too many constraints exist to make field tests practical. In fact, many research centers have abandoned agricultural biotechnology research because there is little likelihood that any farm in Italy will be able to benefit from such research any time soon.

On the other side, environmental groups have protested against the approval of the protocols, reiterating their concerns about the possible contamination