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Germany

Biotechnology

German AgMinister Considers Cultivation Ban for MON810

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Report Highlights:

German Minister for Agriculture, Food and Consumer Protection (BMELV), Ilse Aigner has publically speculated about another cultivation ban for MON810 corn varieties. She has indicated that the expected monitoring report on the environmental impact of MON810 will be weighed carefully. Aigner also favors the establishment of state-wide biotech-free regions. NGO's, particularly in Minister Aigner's home state of Bavaria, are increasing pressure over biotechnology in run-up to the European Parliamentary elections in June and German federal elections in September.

Includes PSD Changes: No
Includes Trade Matrix: No
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In an interview with Berliner Zeitung on February 18 and carried widely on radio and TV, German Minister for Agriculture Food and Consumer Protection, Ilse Aigner said that she is considering a cultivation ban for MON810 corn varieties. The paper quoted Aigner as saying "Here (in Germany) green gene technology does not provide recognizable advantages for the people." She also pointed out that consumers reject genetically engineered plants and that farmers do not want them. Aigner indicated that she intends to review the marketing approval for MON810 corn in Germany. She said that if she considers that the technology provider did not implement the monitoring obligations as expected, she will implement another cultivation ban. The interviewer asked the question whether she has the political will to completely ban cultivation of MON810 corn. Aigner answered "Yes."

Aigner also discussed the recent calls from Bavaria for the implementation of biotech-free production regions. Aigner said that she supports the right for separate regions within Germany to declare themselves as biotech-free regions, which would be consistent with EU law. However, she indicated that based on current EU law, there is little scope for this option. Aigner said that she had instructed her Ministry to identify a mechanism to establish biotech-free zones or to declare German states as biotech-free. Aigner said "I completely support this demand," referring to recent calls in her home state of Bavaria for this action.

In discussing field trials, Aigner also demanded more sensitivity to local concerns. For example, she said that she had advised the Federal Seeds Register (FSR) not to apply for biotech variety tests in regions where biotechnology is specifically contentious.

Comment: Aigner gave this interview two days before the opening of the trade show for organic foods (BioFach) in Nuremberg. Just five days ago, a group of 34 organic and other anti-biotech organizations sent an open letter to Aigner demanding that she take clear position against biotech crop cultivation in Germany. This group stated in a press release that they will use Aigner's response for communication with the public. Two weeks ago, Aigner reportedly refused to accept 45,000 postcards from an anti-biotech NGO during a visit to her parliamentary district. The next several months will be very critical for Aigner's party, the Christian Social Union (CSU) in Bavaria. The CSU is campaigning for the European parliament election in June, 2009. Political polls report that it will be a very narrow race for the CSU to be successful and send Bavarian delegates to the next European Parliament. In order to do this, the CSU must get at least 5 percent of all votes cast nationwide in Germany; because of its regional representation, it is therefore searching for every vote in Bavaria.

In the past several weeks, both the Bavarian Minister for the Environment, Markus Soeder, and Gert Sonnleitner, in his position as the Bavarian farmers' association president, have demanded that commercial cultivation of biotech crops should be banned in Bavaria. Interestingly, Sonnleitner did not express this demand for all of Germany in his capacity as president of the national farmers' association. Sonnleitner does not have complete support for this position in the national farmers association. There are farmers that are interested in the tools that current agricultural biotech plant events offer. Across Germany, these farmers are mainly located in eastern regions. While not currently large, there is growing interest even in Northern Bavaria for access to the technology. As of February 17, there have been 3690 hectares of land registered for planting with biotech corn in 2009.

Aigner's interview is a clear signal to German politicians and to the industry that she is not interested in biotech crop cultivation. The issue is very contentious in the public so leading politicians have not dared to counter NGO concerns and campaigns with scientific knowledge. The interview also sheds light on the position Germany is likely to take with regard to the upcoming vote on approvals for other biotech corn events. Also, in this environment there appears little chance that Germany would change its position on the

cultivation bans in other EU countries. In the past, Germany supported the right of EU member countries to individually decide about biotech crop cultivation in their territory.