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Hungary

Agricultural Situation

Hungarian Media Coverage of Biotechnology 1999

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Report Highlights:

The Hungarian Parliament passed legislation regulating biotechnology nearly one year ago and multinational companies were recently given permission to begin field testing genetically modified plants on Hungarian soil. There has been limited public debate concerning biotechnology in Hungary compared to neighboring countries like Austria. This report summarizes three articles that were recently published in a popular Hungarian Agricultural magazine.

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Summary:

Three consecutive articles have been devoted to biotechnology(BT) in a recent issue of *Hungarian Agriculture*, ("Magyar Mezogazdasag" 18/1999, 5/5/99, page 10-13). *Hungarian Agriculture* is a weekly agricultural media that is one of the largest in circulation.

The first article, As The Producers See, was written by three famous plant breeders, also know to be the leaders of the most reputed crop research institutes in Hungary. In the article they evaluate the results of the opinion poll that was sent out to practicing agronomists and farm managers. The second article, Blindfolded, was a report written by a correspondent of the paper, on Dr. Arpad Pusztai's Budapest presentation on his debated research in a U.K. laboratory. The third article, Same and Still Different, written by the director of the Godollo Biotechnology Institute of Hungarian Academy of Science(HAS), is a concise overview of the history of plant production, breeding, and biotechnology. These three articles combined offer a good example for the media of the balanced and popular, but still complex and professional approach of a sensitive topic.

As The Producers See

Organizers of the poll, Plant Breeding Committee of the HAS, received 159 answered questionnaires. The form contained 20 questions with each question having 3-4 optional answers. The questions addressed the administrative conditions in the use of BT, farmers preference concerning the use of GMO varieties, and family preference concerning the consumption of food and utilization of feed containing GMO raw materials.

Question: "Do you deem it advisable to limit the cultivation of GMO plants in some West European countries, or we should let it expand as in the U.S.A.?"

Answer: 80% of the panel choose the answer: - Let them cultivated but the under adequate regulation.

Question: "Would you (the farmer) buy GMO seed?"

Answer: 50% : Yes, depending on the kind of benefit provided by the variety.

35%: Yes, would test them by all means.

2%: No, I shall not by GMO seed at all.

62% of the panel stated that they would give food or medicine to their family and feed for their livestock, containing GMO raw materials. At the same time, 11% stated they would not interact with GMO's at all.

Authors Zoltan Bedo, Jozsef Frank and Laszlo Lang drew the following conclusions:

- Hungarian producers support the production of GMO plant and animal varieties regardless of adequate regulation. Hungarian producers also acknowledge and accept their short and long term risks.

- The Hungarian producers deem GMO's as an important tool in the agricultural progress that could also become a source of their own farming success.

- Most producers expect improvement of crop assurance (pest-resistance, herbicide-resistance etc.) from the GMO varieties but there are also irrational expectations, such as, BT is capable of improving all positive characteristics at the same time.

- Farmers forecast better market positions for products made of conventional raw materials; they partially believe that GMO crops have the capability of increasing agricultural export opportunities for Hungary.
- The pragmatic approach of Hungarian producers is indicated by the producers agreeing to use GMO varieties if the improved traits increased their profit. They would like to introduce GMO's gradually in order to collect first hand experiences. They understand that a GMO variety is better than a conventional one only if field production results justify the effect of the built in gene.
- Since the answering panel answered that they would provide GMO food and medicine to their families and would purchase GMO seed for a higher price, shows their confidence and sensitivity for innovations.

Blindfolded

The journalist referred to the precedents of the fuss around Dr. Pusztai and provided a relatively neutral report on the presentation. This presentation supposedly drew an audience of "hundreds", causing the location to be changed for a larger room.

It is not clear whether the arguments of the presentation remained on a general level or those could not come "through" to the report. Seemingly no one present missed the basic scientific research principles (such as minimum number of samples, repetition, cross-checks etc.) in the presentation.

Answering questions from the audience the professor stressed:

- There are three transgenic products on the market in the U.K. Those can be identified by the label - but what if hundreds of new (GMO) commodities show up on the shelves of shops?
- The registration of a medicine or agricultural chemical needs several years and millions in cost while the genetically manipulated plants can be on the table of consumers almost in minutes.
- Supermarkets in the U.K. have reasonable organic products today. First of all, buyers look for these products for psychic reasons. Hungary has great (export) opportunities in this field.

Same and Still Different

The writer of the article, Ervin Balazs, Director of the Godollo Biotechnology Center has been credited with educating the public on biotechnology issues. The Godollo Institute has hosted lectures of foreign and domestic scientists, administrators, and users that are related to this topic.

Balazs addresses the popular disbelief about the natural and "artificial" breeding, genetical "pollution" etc., demonstrating how the development of diagnostic methods proved the benefits of biotechnology vs. misused chemicals. The article explains the process of new findings, from the research lab to the registered product, and reviews the food safety inspection measures.