

USDA Foreign Agricultural Service

GAIN Report

Global Agricultural Information Network

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Required Report - public distribution

Date: 7/21/2011

GAIN Report Number: IT1131

Italy

Agricultural Biotechnology Annual

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Report Highlights:

Vocal NGOs and lobbying groups negatively influence Italian public opinion against agricultural technology. The main farmers' union, Coldiretti, is strongly anti-biotech, the food retail sector is reluctant to support biotech policies that might be considered anti-consumer, and regions—some of which have declared themselves GMO-free—refuse to establish coexistence rules. Italy appears likely to invoke the safeguard clause to prevent the cultivation of EU-authorized biotech crops, accordingly.

General introduction

Planting biotech crops is not allowed in Italy due the absence of coexistence rules and to a strong opposition by some regions, farmers' unions and NGOs. Although public opinion is generally negative towards biotech food—which is thought to be less healthy and counter to Italian culinary and cultural traditions—the opposition may not be as strong as some believe. Pro-biotech policies currently are not politically expedient. However, eventually they may become economically necessary. Despite opposing the EU's opt-out proposal to grant Member States the ability to opt-out of EU-approved biotech cultivation for non-scientific reasons, Italy may invoke the safeguard clause to prevent the cultivation of EU-authorized biotech crops.

Coexistence

Thus far, neither the central government nor the Regions have established coexistence legislation. The issue is the subject of a seven-year series of legal battles. The Regions are responsible for establishing agricultural policy, including coexistence rules. However, in October 2010, the Region Committee (the body's 22 members representing the regions and autonomous provinces of Italy), called on the Ministry for Agriculture to impose a full moratorium on the two GMO varieties licensed for cultivation in Italy and the EU—Monsanto's MON810 and BASF's amflora potato—by invoking the safeguard clause. The Regions rejected the Ministry's proposed guidelines for coexistence and are waiting for the EU to issue opt-out regulations. In addition, many regions and municipalities have declared themselves GMO-free, banning the sowing of GMO seeds on their territory. Currently, Italy appears likely to invoke the safeguard clause to prevent the cultivation of EU-authorized biotech crops. For the past decade, Italy has maintained a defacto ban on the cultivation of biotech crops by failing to develop necessary regulations. Observers speculate that Italy will provide the Commission some type of evidence to support its request not to cultivate EU-approved biotech crops and that the Commission will not reject the request even though EFSA has determined that crops are safe.

Seeds for planting

Italy applies a "zero tolerance" for adventitious presence of genetically modified seeds in conventional lots. The main authority in Italy is the Ministry of Agriculture (MOA). The MOA controls registration of seed varieties with the National Register and also regulates the tolerances for the adventitious presence (AP) of genetically modified seeds in conventional seed lots. Article 1 of the Legislative Decree 212 of April 24, 2001, formally implementing the EU Directive 98/95, makes seed planting subject to the authority of the Ministry of Agriculture, fixing the general principle that all appropriate measures need to be taken to prevent GM seeds from entering in contact with conventional seeds. For technical purposes, the tolerance level is actually 0.049 percent, or the minimum detectable level.

Low Level Presence (LLP)

In February 2011, EU-27 Member States (MS) approved the so-called "technical solution" to permit higher traces of unauthorized GMOs in animal feed consignments (food has not been included so far). After two postponed votes, MS formed a qualified majority (QMV) in favor of the new rules on low-level presence (LLP). The new LLP policy means that the Commission can now bring in a new 0.1 percent tolerance threshold for unapproved GMO traces in feed consignments. This is a significant change to the previous "zero tolerance" approach, which essentially relied on the

detection of GMO traces at levels below what is scientifically reliable. Although Italy was initially not willing to support the technical solution, it eventually voted in favor of it largely to address the need to harmonize the EU's import inspection methodology.

Deliberate release of GM

Italy implemented EU Directive 18/2001 via Legislative Decree 334/2003. Among other measures, the Decree moved the responsibility for the deliberate release of GM material from the Ministry of Health to the Ministry of Environment. However, the same decree made several ministries responsible for authorizing new biotech events. These are Health, Labor, Agriculture, Economic Development, Education, as well as the CIV (Interministerial Evaluation Committee), which was specifically created under the lead of the Ministry of Environment, and composed of representatives from the various ministries. Although the function of the several ministries remains advisory to Environment, the decree also gives autonomous competence not only to Health and Agriculture to use the safeguard clause. The above Ministries, therefore, can, "with an emergency act, temporarily limit or prohibit the release into the market, the use or sale of a GMO, as such or contained in a product, if, after the date of authorization, based on new information regarding the assessment of environmental risks, or following a new evaluation of the existing information, based on new or supplementary scientific knowledge, they have reasonable grounds to believe that such GM can represent a risk for human, animal health, or the environment." The same decree, furthermore, specifies that the Ministry of Environment should pay particular attention to the compatibility of biotech release with typical and high quality products. This clause is considered by the Italian biotech industry to be inconsistent with the EU legislation that does not identify any incompatibility between biotech crops and typical productions. This issue is highly sensitive in Italy, where traditional "high quality" food items are touted as needing protection from any "contamination" from biotech products.

Field Testing and GMO research

Italy was one of the first European countries to experiment with GM plants and organisms. Therefore, many public and private research projects were launched regarding various crops, such as olive oil, grapevines, cherries, strawberries, reaching more than 250 experimental projects on a national level. Nevertheless, the national political debate on biotech crops (and plants experimentation) gradually deteriorated reducing Italy's commitment on GMO's research and cultivation. Public and private research funding on agro-biotechnology has gradually been cut to zero and currently no GMOs field trial is being conducted in Italy. In 2001, the Ministry of Agriculture (MOA) issued a decree banning biotechnology experimentation in agriculture. However, later on, Italy had to transpose the EU Directive 18/2001 on the deliberate release into the environment of GMOs. In 2005 then, the MOA issued another decree establishing the main requirements to evaluate the risk linked to GMO experimental plantings and tasking regions to find out crops and sites where GMO field trials could be conducted. Given such provisions, some regions in 2008 approved nine crops-site dossiers (citrus, kiwifruit, strawberry, sweet cherry, corn, olive, eggplant, tomato, grape) to carry out GMO experimentations. Nevertheless, the MOA never implemented a decree to authorize those experimental sites due to the absence of coexistence rules. Moreover, many Italian regions and provinces have declared themselves to be "GM-free," further hampering the scope for new research and plantings.

Traceability and Labeling

Italy implemented traceability and labeling regulations in April 2004. Since then, however, almost no foods have been sold at retail level labeled as GM products, due mainly to the worries of processors and distributors that they will be targeted consumer advocates. In recent months, Greenpeace targeted a company producing seed oil after finding in supermarkets some of its products labeled as containing oil produced from GM soy. The association called upon consumers to boycott such products and to read carefully the label before purchasing the products. A similar event occurred several years earlier when oil produced from GM seeds also was recalled by the company due to harsh protests from the consumers.

However, this does not necessarily mean that no GM food products are consumed in Italy. In the case of animal feeds, the main GM feed ingredient is, of course, soybean meal. After years of denial, most media and even anti-biotech groups are realizing that most typical Italian Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) products, including Parmigiano Reggiano, Grana Padano and Parma ham come from animals intensively fed with GM soybean meal. Italy indeed is a net importer of soybean and soybean meal, which represent the main ingredients in animal feed. According to industry estimates, 80-90 percent of total soybean meal is GM, imported mainly from Argentina and Brazil. Italy imports feed corn mainly from other European countries and, hence, it is probably not GM corn.

Biotechnology products market acceptance

Several vocal NGOs and lobbying groups lead the charge against domestic development of biotechnology in Italy strongly influencing the politicians and consumers opinion.

Italy must strike a balance between the productive, economic, and environmental implications of the gene revolution, and its position under its "made in Italy" campaign and its role as a leading organic crop producer. The main farmer organizations are divided in their support of biotechnology. While Coldiretti and CIA have always maintained strong anti-biotech attitudes, Confagricoltura stresses on the Italian agricultural sector need for innovation and specifically biotech research often calling for a more rational approach.

As for the food retail sector, the uncertainty around biotech national policy and the strong opposition from the public opinion, sharply affect supermarket chain marketing strategies so that one supermarket chain and several brand names have consistently, and successfully, marketed themselves as GMO-free.

According to the 2010 Eurobarometer – Biotechnology report, overall, Italians do not see the benefits of genetically modified food and consider these to be unsafe or even harmful. This explains the low percentage (20 percent) of Italians generally in favor of the development of genetically modified food. In addition, the public has strong reservations about animal cloning in food production and Italians do not see the benefits of this science. There is a general feeling that animal cloning in food production should not be encouraged

Recent FAS Rome reports on agricultural biotechnology:

| Member State/EU | Date | Report Number | Title |
|-----------------|----------|---------------|--|
| Italy | 7/6/2011 | IT1127 | Italy Intends to Invoke Safeguard Clause |

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