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## Italy

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### Italy Again Complains about EU GMO Approvals

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Agricultural Situation

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**Report Highlights:**

The European Commission's decision to end the *de facto* moratorium on GMO approvals and to approve the first GMO crop for cultivation in the European Union in 12 years has sparked the usual complaints from Italy. Italian Minister of Agriculture Zaia stated he is adamantly opposed to the decision and suggested holding a national referendum. He reiterated that Italy's strict enforcement of a ban on GM foods is a "question of national sovereignty" and announced plans to ally with other EU members to demand that the decision be reversed.

## General Information:

On March, 2, the European Commission (EC) approved the transgenic Amflora potato for cultivation, ending its 12-year *de facto* moratorium on approvals to cultivate genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in the European Union (EU). The Commission also approved the use of Amflora by-products (peels) as animal feed and 3 varieties of GMO corn for importation, processing, and use.

“The European Union operates on the rule of law. There have to be certainties about the way Europe is managed. Protocols and procedures must be followed. I did not think we should wait any longer,” explained John Dalli the European Commissioner for Health and Consumer Policy, who stressed the long evaluation process, including approval by the European Food Safety Agency (EFSA). According to Europabio, an additional 17 GMO crops are in the approval process for cultivation and 44 products are awaiting authorization for food and feed as well as for import and processing in the EU.

The Commission’s decision has sparked the usual complaints from Italy and has received prominent attention in the Italian media. Italian Minister of Agriculture Zaia stated he is adamantly opposed to the decision and suggested holding a national referendum. He reiterated that Italy’s strict enforcement of a ban on GM foods is a “question of national sovereignty” and announced plans to ally with other EU members to demand that the decision be reversed.

This reaction is despite the fact that Italy’s policy on biotech is confused at best. The Berlusconi government has signaled a “progressive” approach to biotech, and the Ministry of Environment approved the protocol for biotech field trials, while numerous other ministries have signaled a favorable stance. Last year, Italy even abstained on two EU biotech votes, reversing a six year string of negative votes. Italy’s highest court recently ruled in favor of farmers who challenged the Minister’s refusal to sign legislation authorizing biotech field trials. Even the Minister himself, who is running for political office, has stated numerous times, including at the G8, that his opposition to biotechnology is his personal view and not the government’s position. Additionally, Commissioner Dalli indicated that Member States would be able to ‘maneuver’ either via revised legislation or simply a more flexibility interpretation of the safeguard clauses the EU countries may invoke, as 6 have already done for the only other GMO crop approved for cultivation in the EU—MON810 maize.

Objective observers have a difficult time understanding the Ministry’s objections to biotechnology. “To those who say that GMO crops are the future, I answer that the real challenge for our agricultural economy is traceability and origin, in respect of the identity and quality of the 4,500 Italian typical products. Furthermore to those who want to use them as a solution to the current economic crisis, I repeat that this is not a purely Italian crisis, as people would make you believe while deceiving farmers by telling them lies, but an international situation caused by those who chose to finance the economy by putting the interest of an elite group ahead of that of the people. Food has been, until now, considered a commodity on which to speculate, an open land at the mercy of who is stronger. Therefore I want to stress that the answer to this crisis are not the GMOs. Those who believe it have not learned their lesson well and would like to continue using earth land as an inexhaustible resource. The peasants, on whose shoulders rests the burden of today’s crisis and its solutions, would lose, with the GMOs, their sovereignty over seeds, which would then become unique assets of the corporations. We will not allow it.”

Commissioner Dalli has an opposing view. He said “Once the scientists have spoken, I am not going to interpret their positions in terms of the popularity rating I want.” Many of those

scientists are located at European Food Safety Agency (EFSA) in Parma, Italy, which conducted a series of safety assessments and concluded that the Amflora potato is safe for humans, animals, and the environment. The UN's Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) also recently presented an opposing view at the World Food Summit, held in Rome, Italy, that agricultural technology, including biotechnology, is an important tool to address world food security (and also climate change). Among the benefits the Commission itself listed for approving the three GMO corn varieties are: 1) GMO corn varieties are less susceptible to molds and mycotoxins, 2) GMO corn varieties provide environmental benefits by increasing yields on the same amount of land, with fewer inputs, including pesticides, 3) the EU livestock industry relies on GMO imports to be competitive, and 4) approval will avoid trade disruption.

The German firm, BASF, which developed the Amflora potato to be rich in starch as an alternative thickening agent for paper, adhesives and textiles, has been seeking the Commission's approval for cultivation since 1996. Sources expect cultivation could begin this April in the Czech Republic, Germany, Sweden and the Netherlands. The Amflora potato is an industrial crop and no food use is anticipated.

Zaia recently vowed to prevent the potato from crossing Italy's border in order to protect Italy's agriculture, culinary heritage, and consumers. Many observers find it difficult to understand what the Ministry thinks it is protecting Italian consumers from. A significant percentage of Italians would buy GMO foods if they were available and most do so without realizing it. GMO's long ago crossed Italy's borders and entered the Italian food chain. Italy annually imports more than 4 million tons of GMO soybeans and soybean meal as basic ingredients for its livestock, dairy, and poultry sectors whose products are processed into Parma ham, Parmigiano-Reggiano, and other renowned Italian food products.