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Moscow Government Stops Requiring GMO-Free Labeling of Food Products

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Report Highlights:

In April 2012, the Moscow City Government stopped requiring “Does not Contain GMO!” labels on food products. This labeling was introduced by the Moscow City Government in 2007. It was theoretically voluntary, but many companies felt it was necessary to abide by this in order to maintain positive relations with the Moscow government. In addition, this labeling was mandatory for all food products purchased using funds from the Moscow Government’s budget. The abolishment of “Does not Contain GMO!” labeling of food products, which from the very beginning contradicted federal legislation and placed an additional burden on businesses, seems to illustrate a trend in Russia of weakening staunch opposition to products derived from GM plants and GM technology in general.

General Information:

The Moscow City Government abolished the GMO-free labeling requirement for food products by its Resolution #115-PP of March 28, 2012 “On invalidation of legal acts of the Government of Moscow and the amendments to legal acts of the Government of Moscow”. This Resolution annulled all previous Moscow City Government documents and measures related to the labeling of products as GMO-free. At the same time the Resolution #115-PP amended the Moscow City Government’s document “On improving control of quality and safety of agricultural products and foodstuff in Moscow”. The amendment envisages that if the product meets the standards of ecological products, it may be labeled as an “Ecological Product”, and the label “Does not Contain GMO!” shall not be used. The text of Resolution #115-PP was not posted on the Moscow City Government website, and the exact date of its coming to force is not clear, but by the end of April Moscow officials reported to mass media that it was already in force. In addition, on April 17, 2012, Mr. Orlov, the Head of Department of Trade and Consumer Services of the City Government, reported to Sergey Sobyenin, the present Moscow city Mayor, on the abolishment of GMO-Free labeling, which, according to experts and conclusion of the Federal Anti-Monopoly Service, “distorted the production and trade in food products, and the consumers’ perception of the ecological properties of products” (the shorthand record of the meeting of the Moscow City Government is located at : http://www.mos.ru/press-center/transcripts/index.php?id_4=21765 .)

Background

The GMO-free labeling requirement was introduced by the Moscow City Government Resolution #88-PP of February 13, 2007 “On Additional Measures for Ensuring the Quality and Safety of Food Products, and Informing Consumers in the City of Moscow”. It recommended that producers, suppliers and retailers refrain from manufacturing, supplying and marketing any food products that contain GMO on the territory of the city of Moscow. The same Resolution stated that beginning July 1, 2007, food producers could voluntarily test their products for absence of biotech (GMO) ingredients at the city government’s laboratories, and receive a special green-colored label “Does not Contain GMO!” issued by the Moscow City Government. The resolution also outlined shaming measures for those enterprises that do not inform the public of GMO presence in their products, for example by having laboratories widely publish positive GMO finding directly in the mass media. The resolution also stated that money from the Moscow city budget may not be used to purchase any food products containing any trace of GMO ingredients.¹ Of course no science-based evidence was presented in support of this labeling requirement.

Since this resolution came into effect in 2007 the major food producing companies in Moscow have tested products extensively to make sure they are free from GMO-ingredients. Some meat packing companies even changed recipes of processed meat products, such as sausages, and replaced vegetable protein ingredients (that could contain traces of GMO) with cattle and pig offal. These changes were made entirely to obtain this GMO-free label, and in no way because of an expected improvement in quality or safety as a result of these changes. While there may have been some economic benefit in

¹ NOTE: for more information on the Moscow City Government Resolution of 2007 see GAIN report RS7023 _ “GMO-Free” Labeling of Food Products in Moscow _ Moscow_Russian Federation_3/6/2007.

2007-2010 for products labeled GMO-free due to a strong anti-GMO campaign in Moscow, the anti-GMO mood has been fading the past few years (especially since September 28, 2010 when President Medvedev fired Moscow Mayor Yuriy Luzhkov, who was an outspoken critic of biotechnology). Currently non-GMO labeling seems to largely have lost any impact on consumer purchasing decisions. According to industry specialists and mass media, business reaction on abolishment the of “Does not Contain GMO!” labels has been very favorable.

The Moscow City Government Resolution #115-PP of March 28, 2012 abolished the Resolution #88-PP of 2007 and all relevant city government’s documents on GMO-free labeling. On April 10, 2012, Dmitriy Krasnov, the Deputy Head of Department of Trade and Consumer Services of the present Moscow City Government, in an interview to mass media gave the following reasons for the abolishment of this GMO-free labeling:

1. The “Does not Contain GMO!” labels misled consumers as inferring some beneficial qualities of these products, even when they could have contained harmful substances.
2. “Does not Contain GMO!” labeling was a burden for the city government’s budget. In 2007 – 2011 Moscow spent 170 million rubles (\$6 million) for testing 70,000 samples of food products on GMO in order to issue “Does not Contain GMO!” labels. In 2008 3.9 percent of samples contained GMO, in 2009 – only 0.14 percent of samples contained GMO, and in 2010 and in 2011 none of the samples submitted for GMO tests contained GMO.
3. The requirement of the Moscow City Government contradicted federal legislation. The control over GMOs in food products is the responsibility of the Federal Service for Consumer Rights Protection and Well-Being of Population (Rospotrebnadzor) at the Ministry of Health. According to federal legislation, producers shall inform consumers about the presence of GMO in food products, (and this information shall be included in the label) only when the share of each biotech ingredient exceeds 0.9 percent of the product. The Russian Anti-Monopoly Service has always opposed the voluntary “Does not Contain GMO!” labeling as violating rules of competition.

Anti-Biotech Sentiment Might be Waning

The abolishment of “Does not Contain GMO!” labeling of food products, which from the very beginning contradicted federal legislation and placed an additional burden on businesses, seems to illustrate a trend in Russia of weakening staunch opposition to products derived from GM plants and GM technology in general. On April 24, 2012 Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin approved the “Complex Program of Biotechnology Development in Russia until 2020” in which agricultural and food biotechnologies are included in the list of priorities of biotechnology development in Russia. In fact, the program envisions financing of the development of specifically agricultural and food biotechnology at a forecast 200 billion rubles (approximately \$6.7 billion) in 2011-2020.

Given that Moscow still accounts for almost 40 percent of Russia’s wholesale turnover of foodstuff, the decision of the Moscow City Government to abolish this GMO-free labeling rule may also increase the use of vegetable proteins in the food industry in Russia as a whole. The Moscow example may also influence food policies of some other provincial administrations, such as Krasnodar kray and Belgorod oblast, which also have their own local GMO-free labeling requirements.