

Viewing cable 09BRUSSELS1394, EPC GMO DEBATE : RISK OR OPPORTUNITY FOR EUROPE ?

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SUBJECT: EPC GMO DEBATE : RISK OR OPPORTUNITY FOR EUROPE ?

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¶1. SUMMARY: On October 15 in Brussels, the European Policy Center (EPC) hosted a lively debate on the role of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in European agriculture. Following largely pro-GMO remarks by European Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development Mariann Fischer Boel, speakers from both camps opined on coexistence between GM and non-GM crops, science-based policy making in the context of politics, U.S. GMO influence and regulations, and Commission President Barroso's policy statement to the European Parliament. END SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

¶2. The theme of the October 15 policy dialogue was "Risk or Opportunity? Has Europe Got the Balance Right on GMOs?" Serving on the panel were Julien Mousnier, Member of the Fischer Boel Cabinet,

Per Bergman, Head of the GMO Unit at the European Food Safety Agency (EFSA), Willy De Greef, Secretary General of EuropaBio (a pro-biotechnology think tank), Helen Holder, Senior Campaigner for Friends of the Earth and a prominent critic of GMOs in Europe, and Roberto Pagni, Head of the Sustainable Agriculture Unit in the Region of Tuscany. EPC Chief Executive Hans Martens served as moderator.

FISCHER BOEL: GMO PROCESS A "SLOW MOTION TENNIS MATCH"

¶3. In her keynote address, Commissioner Fischer Boel focused largely on the issue of low level presence (LLP) of unapproved GMOs in U.S. soy exports to Europe, which has prevented sale and delivery of U.S. soy to European farmers (REFTEL). She said asynchronous approvals of GMOs in the U.S. ahead of Europe represented "a clear and present financial threat" to EU farmers and expressed her interest in the introduction of a "technical zero" solution to allow the exports to move forward.

¶4. Fischer Boel also commented on the increasing politicization of the GMO issue in the face of "sound, science-based risk assessments." She stressed that assessing risk "is the task of science, and science is the right foundation" for approval of GMOs. She said "the rules were black and white"-if a GMO is determined by EFSA to safe for human health, animal health, and the environment, "it will be authorized." She likened the political process on allowing GMOs into Europe as a "slow motion tennis match" in which "the European farmer will be the loser."

¶5. On the issue of cultivation, she reached out to member states and, reiterating views on GMOs expressed by Commission President Barroso in his recent policy statement to Parliament, suggested an approach that accelerated the authorization and imports of GMOs into Europe while at the same time allowing member states to decide "whether or not to cultivate on their own territory." She closed by advising Europeans to "be courageous and sensible" on the GMO issue and "let the voice of science speak, and act accordingly."

FRIENDS OF THE EARTH: PROMISE OF GMOS UNMET

¶6. Holder set forth a number of arguments against GMOs. She said pesticide and herbicide use in GMO producing countries such as the U.S., Brazil, and Argentina had actually risen despite the claims of GMO producers that their use would result in a reduction in biocide application and that other promises of GMOs in terms of scope and utility had been mostly unmet. Holder countered pro-GMO supporters who said Europe would be isolated by not allowing increased GMO imports and said "it is the U.S. that is isolated as they are producing a product that no one wants". She added that even developing countries such as China, India, and South Africa had stricter controls over GMOs, particularly in the area of market export criteria, than in the U.S.

EFSA: NEITHER PRO NOR ANTI GMOS; JUST PRO SCIENCE

¶7. EFSA's role as the primary and neutral assessor of risks in the EU was underscored by Bergman, who said his agency looked at safety and risks first, but was not mandated to appraise benefits and opportunities. He said it was clear that, even once approved by EFSA, GMOs had to be handled very carefully and that "careful

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stewardship" by EFSA, the Commission, and member states was important. Bergman said EFSA scientists were aware of the divergence of attitudes towards GMOs within the EU, but said that policy is for the politicians; the science that advises that policy is sound.

EUROPABIO: GMOs ARE A EUROPEAN INVENTION

¶8. De Greef stressed Europe's role as a pioneer in the GMO and biotech movement but said "we are quickly losing our advantage here". He said that more than 50% of the GMOs that will be introduced in future will come from developing countries such as China, India, and South Africa, not from major American biotech companies. Regarding safety, De Greef cited a Joint Research Centre (JRC) study presented to EFSA in September that examined GMO use in Spain and pointed out there had been no safety issues in the 10 years GMO crops have been grown there. He also predicted "enormous demand" for drought resistant GM crops now coming through the pipeline and seen by many as a way for countries, particularly in Africa, to adapt to climate change.

TUSCANY: GMO FREE, SORT OF

¶9. Pagni briefed on Tuscany's regional approach to GMOs, which prohibited cultivation based on the precautionary principle and a determination that "growing GMOs is not consistent with our model, which favors small farms over mass production and quality derived from organic farming over anything that may be artificial". But he acknowledged the import of GMOs in feed was permitted "as a pragmatic measure." Pagni said he saw a need for more research on GMOs conducted by public institutions without funding by big business and suggested Italian farmers would trust those results. He closed and said the EU's Committee of Regions will host a conference on GMO-free foodstuffs February 3-4 in Brussels.

DISCUSSION: MUST KEEP AN OPEN MIND

¶10. For the Qs and As, the panel returned to the issue of LLPs on a question of moving controls and testing for LLPs to the source country. Holder disagreed and said Europe had to be responsible for testing. Bergman noted that source testing "is already done to some extent" but there needed to be a stronger agreement on common protocols and sampling methods before it could be employed more widely.

¶11. Holder and De Greef had a testy exchange on drought-resistant GMOs. Holder returned to her view that as only two traits and four crops represent the sum total of GMO activity at present, GMOs had yet to live up to their promise. De Greef reiterated a GMO solution to climate change and said that a number of drought-tolerant crops were in the approval pipeline. Holder responded that even Monsanto's application, now before EFSA, for its own drought-tolerant maize says Monsanto "is not even sure it's actually going to work" and suggested the application was "strategic ahead of Copenhagen," a fact that "has not escaped notice of a number of member states."

¶12. Mousnier emphasized the need to "keep an open mind on GMOs" as there were "interesting products down the road." He suggested a less, which usually works quite well, was "creating problems with GMOs."

COMMENT

1Q. While most presenters stuck to their long-established, and unsurprising, positions on GMOs, what was quite striking, and potentially problematic, was the Commission's public embrace of the Barroso II approach to GMOs at least twice in the session. Should it go down this road, the Commission will likely find pressure to extend its proposed deference to member states on cultivation to ceding competence on imports, providing official backing for the current Europe has not got the balance right on GMOs.

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MURRAY