

Viewing cable 06WARSAW107, POLAND: SENIOR ADVISOR FOR AGRICULTURAL

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SUBJECT: POLAND: SENIOR ADVISOR FOR AGRICULTURAL
BIOTECHNOLOGY SPIRNAK'S MEETINGS WITH GOP OFFICIALS AND
ACADEMIA

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¶1. (SBU) Summary. Senior Advisor for Agricultural Biotechnology Madelyn Spirnak visited Warsaw on November 29 and 30, 2005 to discuss the USG position on genetically modified organisms (GMO's), with GOP officials, members of the academic community, and the media. While the current GOP and much of Polish society express serious concerns about transgenic plants, these attitudes appear to reflect the perceived European view on the subject, and are not based on negative experience or scientific data. Spirnak was encouraged by some ministerial employees' and professors' positive views of genetic engineering, though this was tempered by the message that much work would be needed to reverse mainstream negative opinion. One conclusion in particular was very clear: The GMO issue is currently driven by public opinion, and political and social tactics are necessary to win over decision makers and the public.

Views from the Academy of Science

¶2. (SBU) Spirnak first met with six scientists and experts whose research deals with plant genetics. This discussion, like Spirnak's others, focused on genetically modified plants, not animals. All of the scientists present lamented the fact that several years ago Polish society accepted the idea of GMO's, but that now 70% of the Polish public rejected

them as potential sources of food and for use in agriculture.

Furthermore, the scientists expect no change in this attitude in the near future. In their opinion, GMO advocates must focus on the potential benefits to consumers, not to producers, in swaying public opinion.

¶3. (SBU) The scientists also said that a new law governing GMO's is currently being considered in Parliament, and that all future approaches to the issue must reflect EU policy and also the general EU attitude on the subject. One scientist noted that part of the opposition to GMO's in Poland stemmed from the fact there is no starvation in Polish society, so why introduce transgenic food crops? On the other hand, Poles do not oppose the use of GMO's in medicine, because this leads to cheaper drugs. The scientists reasoned that a campaign focused on the potential lower cost of foods made with GMO's would resonate with average Poles. The group also pointed out that GMO's are generally produced and marketed by large corporations. This fact does not play well with the Polish public, and especially with small farmers, who are wary of large corporations encroaching on a market that is perceived to be traditionally within the domain of small business.

The Ministries: Neutrality Among the Experts, Public Opinion Reigns

¶4. (SBU) Spirnak also visited the Ministries of Environment and Agriculture for the GOP view. In Environment, Acting Deputy Director of Environmental Protection Anna Liro (previous IV program participant) stated that science plays the central role in the run up to policy formulation in the lower levels of the Ministry, but that ultimately the Minister, when issuing statements and decisions, takes opinion and politics into consideration. Liro also stressed that Poland's focus in the area of GMO policy is harmonization with the EU. In fact, the GOP is currently drafting legislation to bring Poland into EU compliance in the areas of labeling and traceability. Included in this legislation is language stating the GOP officials must develop coexistence regulations. The legislation, which requires Parliamentary approval, is still working its way through administrative clearances. Liro could not predict when the legislation might finally be sent to Parliament.

¶5. (SBU) In the Ministry of Agriculture, Spirnak met with the new Undersecretary of Agriculture responsible for biotechnology, Lech Rozanski. Rozanski stressed that Polish public opinion is against the use of GMO's, and that the GOP must yield to public opinion. Therefore, the GOP is contemplating regulations that might be even more stringent than current EU versions, including bans on both food (including use in processed food) and feed. Rozanski went on to explain that Polish food products are viewed in the EU as healthy and natural, and are competitive in their current state. Use of GM seeds could threaten this perception, and thus Poland's place in the market. When Spirnak and Embassy Agricultural Counselor noted that such an approach would be

of great concern to the U.S. and would be contrary to EU as well as WTO commitments, Rozanski backed off and said that Poland must comply with EU and international commitments (Note: Rozanski softened this message further at a subsequent meeting that Agricultural Counselor attended).

¶6. (SBU) Rozanski also explained that several months ago Poland submitted a letter to the European Commission requesting EC approval for a two-year moratorium on the import and planting of 16 GMO seed varieties that for agronomic reasons can not be grown in Poland. The GOP is still waiting for an answer in this matter.

Informed Polish Students Voice Concern, But No Visceral Opposition

¶7. (U) Spirnak made a presentation at the highly regarded Warsaw Agricultural University (SGGW), the institution that trains many of Poland's future leaders in agriculture and agricultural policy. The lecture was very well attended (by 100 students approximately) and the SGGW students were very familiar with the issues surrounding GMO's. During the Q&A session, students were cautious but not overtly opposed to GMO's. They asked questions that covered topics ranging from food safety and GMO's to the potential for GMO producing countries to "dump" food into the EU market. In general, the students seemed to approach the subject objectively, although they have obviously been influenced by the overriding negative European attitude toward GMO's.

¶8. (U) Spirnak's second lecture took place at the American Studies Center at Warsaw University. Approximately 20 students and faculty attended the lecture. Again, the students did not openly object to the idea of consuming GMO's but did reflect the typical European mistrust surrounding the issue. They asked about the purpose of altering the genetic structure of food, in what is essentially a "if it's not broken don't fix it" argument that is commonly made in Poland.

Root Causes of the Opposition

¶9. (SBU) Spirnak discussed the lack of Polish public support for GMO's during a meeting with Robert Gabarkiewicz, Monsanto Representative. Gabarkiewicz said that 10% of Polish farmers produce 80% of the food consumed in the Polish market. These farmers support GMO's because they lead to higher crop yields and greater profits. However, the 90% of Polish farmers who produce 20% of the food are adamantly opposed because they are reliant on (or seeking to qualify for) EU funds under the Common Agricultural Policy. These farmers run very small scale operations and see the more tangible value of subsidies outweighing the longer-term benefits of GMO's. Since this segment of the Polish population numbers in the millions, their potential votes are a strong driver of policy decisions. Gabarkiewicz also stated that soybeans are imported into Poland each year, mainly from Argentina and

Brazil, for use in the feed industry. These beans are certainly genetically modified, so there are GM products that regularly enter Poland for feed use.

¶10. (SBU) Spirnak's last meeting was with Slawomir Zagorski, a reporter from Gazeta Wyborcza, the newspaper with the largest circulation in Poland. Zagorski, also the paper's Science Editor, lent a sympathetic ear to Spirnak, and recounted that he had written a story on GMO's recently, following a visit to the U.S. sponsored by the Department of Agriculture. In the aftermath of publication, Zagorski was accused of being an "agent" for Monsanto who had taken bribes to write a story portraying GMO's positively. Although he is still interested in the subject, he explained, he simply can not write another story on GMO's right now, given the deeply negative public reaction to his last story.

Summary: Fact, Fiction, and Reversing Public Opinion

¶11. (SBU) Two themes emerged during Spirnak's visit, one concerning Polish society and the other the Polish government. First, most of the Polish public not directly involved in agriculture or politics does not really feel a strong attachment to either side of the GMO argument. The average Pole takes a mildly negative view of GM food, but this attitude seems to have percolated up from certain segments of the Polish countryside, and from anti-GMO interest group activity throughout Europe. While they have no firm experience on which to base their opinions, many Poles simply believe that GMO's are potentially dangerous and that they are unnecessary. They believe there is already too much food crop production in the EU, and that GM food products simply can not compare to their "natural" counterparts in terms of taste and nutritional value. We also heard continually that people can live with choice, but want to know through labeling if they are consuming GM products.

¶12. (SBU) Second, it was clear that experts in the ministries approach the GMO issue using science as their principal tool. On the other hand, their superiors, those at the policy level, grant greater weight to public opinion. This is troublesome since the current government was elected with overwhelming support from small farmers in rural Poland and this voting bloc is traditionalist in worldview. These two facts indicate that a significant portion of voters will likely remain opposed to GMO use in Poland, at least until commercially beneficial GM seed is available to Polish farmers.

¶13. (SBU) Given discussions within academia and with other pro-biotech actors, our strategy to influence a more positive public attitude toward bioengineered crops should focus on consumer benefits and the positive effects GMO's could have in reducing the costs of food and medicine. Our efforts also should focus on the positive environmental impact GMO's provide via reduced pesticide and herbicide use and encouraging reduced-till practices. In the days ahead, it is

vital to work with the GOP officials to prevent the imposition of a proposed two-year moratorium on GM seeds and to influence the drafting of future coexistence and liability regulations, with the hope of ensuring that they are not so restrictive as to prevent the commercial use of GM seed in Poland. The gradual introduction of GM crops for feed use (in contrast to direct human consumption) could eventually soften public opposition to other GMO uses. Imported GM feeds already are being used in Poland, thus this bridge has already been crossed.

¶14. (U) Senior Advisor for Agricultural Biotechnology Madelyn Spirnak cleared this cable.
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