



GMOs: Environment Committee strengthens legal grounds for cultivation bans

Committees: Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety

EU Member States should be able to state environmental grounds, such as pesticide resistance, for restricting or banning the cultivation of EU-approved genetically-modified crops, said the Environment Committee on Tuesday. Stating these grounds could strengthen legal protection against possible WTO challenges to GMO bans, it added.

The committee amended a Commission proposal that will allow EU Member States to restrict or ban the cultivation of genetically-modified crop varieties, so as to allow national authorities to cite environmental grounds.

While some MEPs in committee would have preferred to dismiss the Commission proposal altogether, a majority, led by rapporteur Corinne Lepage (ALDE, FR), opted to maintain it with changes. Her report was adopted with 34 votes in favour, 10 against and 16 abstentions. She commented: "This vote is a clear signal from the Parliament to the Council and Commission: the EU authorisation system should be maintained but it should be acknowledged that some agricultural and environmental impacts, as well as socio-economic impacts linked to contamination, can be cited by Member States to justify a ban or restriction on GMO cultivation."

Grounds to ban

While Austria, France, Greece, Hungary, Germany and Luxembourg already use a so-called "safeguard clause" in the current (2001) EU Directive to ban cultivation of certain GMOs on health or environmental grounds, the European Commission's proposed change would have allowed Member States to state only "other" reasons to restrict or ban crops that have been given a green light at EU level.

However MEPs argued that Member States should also be able to cite environmental grounds, such as pesticide resistance, the invasiveness of the crops or the need to maintain biodiversity. This, they say, would provide greater legal protection against possible WTO challenges to GMO bans and would complement the European Food Safety Authority's (EFSA) role in evaluating GMOs' health and environmental implications.

The committee also considered that socioeconomic impacts could provide legitimate grounds for a ban, e.g. where contamination risks cannot practicably be managed or to protect other types of agriculture.

Updating EU safety checks

The proposal does not directly affect the safety approval of GM crop varieties, which will continue to be carried out at EU level. An update to this process is due, following conclusions by EU environment ministers in December 2008. MEPs have underlined that long-term cumulative effects to health and the environment should be assessed.

Next steps

The European Parliament plenary is due to vote on the proposals in June.
In the chair: Jo LEINEN (S&D, DE)

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