

Europe in a pickle over GM crops rules

September 25 2010, by Roddy Thomson

As America chews over a bid to market "Frankenfish" salmon, Europe wants to drop scientific objections from decisions about genetically modified crops in a move even its backers admit leaves a strange taste in the mouth.

With the GM industry and its opponents each sharpening their legal claws, European nations will on Monday debate a proposed rule change that would allow officials to accelerate authorisations for 15 new transgenic crops while letting those who want to keep them off their territories do so.

The continent is deeply divided on the GM issue, which has crept back up the agenda after Germany's BASF "accidentally" sowed seed from an unauthorised potato in Sweden and against a furore in Britain about milk and meat from cloned cattle entering the food chain.

One European Union official describes such "Frankenfoods" fears as "anecdotal" to the talks between farming ministers but others say a move designed to protect the EU from [World Trade Organization](#) prosecution will leave consumers in the dark.

"Surely this should be about science first -- and then consumer choice," says a diplomatic source from one of the big European nations.

"If member states are not allowed to block GM cultivation on scientific or environmental grounds, what grounds can they use and won't these (also) be challenged in the WTO," says a diplomat from another leading

EU country.

Two [GM crops](#) are authorised in Europe -- a strain of maize developed by US giant Monsanto and an earlier BASF potato variety -- but a batch of EU countries also ban transgenic cultivation.

Europe's single market means this patchwork could be challenged in the WTO, so Brussels is trying to find a way to keep both sides happy.

EU health commissioner John Dalli's solution is to remove the scope for "challengeable" scientific or environmental grounds to be used as reasons for applying national bans -- falling back instead on defences based on religion or tradition and, as a last resort, referendum results.

As long as the circulation of authorised GM goods is unrestricted, Brussels reckons both camps can co-exist.

While the Dutch lead the pack eager to develop GM crops, against the likes of Luxembourg, the open-minded see Dalli's plan as potentially "attractive... if this is a way of unblocking the jam," as one said.

A decision is due to be taken by environment ministers next month.

But Dalli's spokesman Frederic Vincent illustrated the difficulty in voting after a decision by the European Commission, which grants licences, to reject a GM cotton application on Friday.

"There were 13 in favour, nine against, four abstained and one was absent," he said. "It's almost always like that."

With a decision on renewing Monsanto's MON 810 maize licence for the next 10 years due "in the coming months," lawyers are edgy.

"To put it bluntly, no member state has yet come up with a convincing reason based on science for blocking GM cultivation on its territory," Vincent insists.

"(But) it's important to stress that the scientific background to the authorisation system will stay," he underlined.

Dalli's office will release a report on Monday claiming that current safety guidelines on distance between GM and organic crops, sometimes as little as five metres (16.5 feet), "is working."

But another report by the European Food Safety Authority on the dangers of contamination said there are too many "limitations when assessing data with surrogate species" to render results conclusive.

For Mute Schimpf, an expert with Brussels-based campaigners Friends of the Earth Europe, consumers are being sold a dummy.

She maintains that "the idea is to press ahead with the next batch of authorisations."

She suggests Austria, Germany and Hungary are wavering, which could bring a Dalli victory closer.

"The difficulty is that this is virgin territory, the commission doesn't want to do the full legal analysis" other countries would like performed before voting, admits an EU official.

The bloc already faces action from a French local authority, famed for foie gras, which intends challenging the import of GM maize feed in the European Court of Justice.

Meanwhile, Greenpeace is using a new citizen provision in the EU's

Lisbon treaty to seek a million signatures over the web to halt the authorisation regime. On Friday they were almost 90 percent there.

The European debate comes as in the United States Massachusetts-based AquaBounty argues that its fish, injected with a gene that helps it reach adult size twice as quickly as normal Atlantic salmon, is in all other respects "identical."

Experts there are trying to decide whether, if the salmon is given the green light, it must carry a GM label, which the developers argue might lead consumers to shun the fish.

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