

New GM corn gets controversial EU go-ahead (Update)

February 11 2014, by Bryan Mcmanus



A corn field in Godewaersvelde, northern France is pictured on August 22, 2012

A new genetically modified corn, US firm Pioneer's TC1507, won EU approval in controversial fashion Tuesday after a large majority of member states failed to block it.

A meeting of European Affairs ministers from the 28-member bloc could not establish a definitive position either way, Greek chairman Evangelos Venizelos said, citing EU procedural rules.

Accordingly, TC1507 was allowed through and handed over to the European Commission for the next step in authorisation.

The rules require that "if the Council (of member states) does not take a decision, then the measure has to be adopted by the European Commission," a legal adviser said.

The outcome, largely expected, sparked outrage among environmental groups, with Greenpeace charging the Commission was acting illegally.

"The Commission cannot ignore the scientific, political and legal concerns voiced by a large majority of countries, by two thirds of the European Parliament and supported by most EU citizens," it said in a statement.

"The Commission must learn from its mistakes and stop breaching the rules that help ensure the safety of what is grown in Europe."

A spokesman for Pioneer, a unit of US giant DuPont, told AFP it was looking forward to the Commission going ahead "sooner rather than later to give us final approval."

It will take another two years to get it on the market, he said, adding: "Today is not the day to celebrate if you look at the already 13 year-long process."

Majority of member states opposed

The EU was on the spot after a European Court ruling last year that Pioneer's 2001 request for approval had to be dealt with without further delay.

But the General Affairs Council of ministers had to decide the issue

Tuesday under what is known as "qualified majority voting".

This complex system weighs member states according to their size to ensure that it is a majority of the EU's 500 million population which decides an issue, not the simple number of countries for or against.

In this instance, 19 nations were opposed but they had only 210 votes of the required 260 to block the measure.

Britain, Finland, Estonia, Spain and Sweden were in favour, but abstentions proved crucial.

Germany, the EU's most powerful and biggest country with 19 votes, changed its position to abstain from against, thereby taking itself out of the balance.

Also abstaining were Belgium, Portugal and the Czech Republic with 12 votes each.

France and Hungary led the opposition, saying ministers would not be able to easily explain what had happened to the public, especially with European Parliament elections due in May.

Parliament previously rejected TC1507 authorisation by 385 votes to 201.

EU Health Commissioner Tonio Borg told ministers that given the rules and the likely country positions, "if you abstain, you in effect vote for the proposal."

Borg stressed he had no option now but to proceed with TC1507 authorisation, stressing that the European Food Safety Authority had cleared it no less than six times.

The Commission must abide by EFSA's findings, he said, recalling that the EU had recently banned, for example, certain insecticides after EFSA judged they harmed bees.

Cultivation of GM foods stokes widespread suspicion in the 28-nation EU on health and environmental grounds.

GM crops, however, have won repeated safety approvals. Several ministers noted Tuesday that they are imported into the EU in large amounts and, having been fed to animals, had by now entered the human food chain.

Four other GM crops have won EU approval but only Monsanto's MON810 maize is still grown, with two other corn types plus BASF's Amflora potato abandoned.

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