

EU set to OK new GM corn after Germany drops objection

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Genetically modified corn cobs are seen on September 21, 2008

A new genetically modified crop, US firm Pioneer's TC1507 corn, is set for approval in Europe next week after Germany dropped its objections, several EU sources told AFP Wednesday.

"Germany is moving from being against to abstaining" in a vote on the long-running controversy, said a source close to the dossier who asked not to be identified. A second source confirmed.

Ministers meeting in Brussels on Tuesday are to hand down a final decision on the cultivation of TC1507 corn after a European Court ruled late last year that the company's 2001 request for permission must be dealt with.

But the 28-nation bloc is badly divided over GM crops, and the EU's complex voting arithmetic has been at the heart of a deadlock on a decision.

The European Union's general affairs ministers will decide next week using qualified majority voting—which is weighted to take account of the bigger states.

If there is no majority against due to one nation's abstention, then approval will be automatic, said the EU's Health Commissioner Tonio Borg on website Views.

When the principle was last voted on in 2009, the heavyweights of Britain, France and Germany ended up cancelling each other out.

Asked to allow GM cultivation in the EU, but to leave space for national and even territorial opt-outs on non-health or environmental grounds, Britain was one of six backers.

France at that time was among 12 states opposed and Germany lead a group of nine that abstained but later switched sides.

Currently Britain, Spain and Sweden are leaders of the "yes" camp, France and Hungary lead opponents and sources say the position of Germany, whose government is divided, will not change the outcome.

There are another six applications for authorisation in the European Commission's pending tray.

To date GM crops have won repeated safety approvals from experts around the world despite environmentalists' fears that they will harm the ecosystem and ultimately human health.

The Pioneer crop, for instance, has already six times been given a clean bill of health by the European Food Standards Authority, although the EU is waiting for proof of modifications demanded of the company, and the six pending applications have also secured EFSA backing.

Environmentalists meanwhile accuse certain EFSA experts of enjoying links with the biotechnology industry that are too close.

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