

EU agrees opt-out deal for GMO imports

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The EU announced plans to allow member states to individually decide whether to allow the import of controversial genetically modified foods and animal feed

The EU announced plans Wednesday to allow member states to individually decide whether to allow the import of controversial genetically modified foods and animal feed, drawing a sharp US response.

The move mirrors an earlier compromise approved by the European Parliament in January which gave the 28 EU countries the right to decide

whether or not to cultivate Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs).

"Once adopted, today's proposal will ... grant Member States a greater say as regards the use of EU- authorised GMOs in food and feed on their respective territories," Health Commissioner Vytenis Andriukaitis said in a statement.

After years of bitter dispute, the EU opt-out provision means that member states opposed to GMOs will now be able to cite grounds outside health and safety, such as social or environmental impact, for banning them.

In theory as well, countries such as Spain which already grow GMOs and want more will no longer be stymied by opponents such as France.

"We are very disappointed by today's announcement of a regulatory proposal that appears hard to reconcile with the EU's international obligations," said Michael Froman, the U.S. Trade Representative.

It also helps resolve a delicate political problem for the European Commission since under current rules if a GMO is judged safe for human consumption by the European Food Safety Agency, then it has no option but to agree that it can be grown or imported without restriction in the EU.



A bag containing MON 810, a variety of genetically modified corn developed by Monsanto—it is the only GMO currently allowed to be cultivated in the EU

The compromise was initially welcomed as breaking up the GMO logjam but environmental groups say that in practice it lets GMOs into the EU via the back door at the behest of giant US agri-food companies just as the bloc is negotiating a massive free trade accord with Washington.

But on the other side, the US and industry groups say the accord breaches the EU's cardinal rule that the bloc constitutes a single market where products are supposed to circulate freely.

Copa-Cogeca, the top farm lobby, said: "It will seriously threaten the internal market for food and feed products, causing substantial job losses and lower investment in the agri-food chain in opt-out countries. This

would cause serious distortions of competition for all EU agri-food chain partners".

Only one GMO is currently allowed to be cultivated in the EU—US multinational Monsanto's brand of corn GMO MON810 that is grown in Spain, Portugal and the Czech Republic.

Some 58 GMO products have been cleared for import into the EU, mainly for cattle feed.

The import accord now goes to the European Parliament for further discussion before it is submitted to member states for final approval.

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