

EU lawmakers pass controversial GMO food law

13 January 2015



Hundreds of anti-GMO activists and Greenpeace activists uproot genetically modified mais plants on May 2, 2014 in a field near Roquettes, France

EU lawmakers on Tuesday approved controversial legislation to allow EU member states to decide for themselves whether to allow cultivation of Genetically Modified foods after years of bitter dispute.

"This agreement will ensure more flexibility for member states who wish to restrict the cultivation of the GMOs in their territory," said Liberal Democrat MEP Frederique Ries who steered the legislation through the assembly.

For some of the 28 European Union nations such as France, GMO foods are a potential threat to public health and the reputation and integrity of its famed agricultural produce.

For others such as Britain, GMOs represent an essential technology which cannot be ignored and is essential to feed a growing world population.

With neither side able to prevail since the legislation was first tabled in 2010, EU leaders

thrashed out a compromise in June to hand the final decision back to member state governments.

On Tuesday, the European Parliament approved this deal by 480 votes to 159.

The legislation crucially allows member states to ban GMOs on environmental policy considerations, even if the crop has already been cleared on health and safety grounds at the EU level following a manufacturer's request.

Supporters of GMO products and the manufacturers had argued that if the EU found no health reason to ban them, then individual member states should have no reason to prevent their cultivation.

In addition, a government can cite other reasons such as in town and country planning, land use, agricultural policy, public policy, or possible socio-economic impacts as reasons to refuse permission.

Critics say the compromise looks good at the headline level but in practice it will allow GMO foods in by the back door.

"It is a bad measure because the EU will become a patchwork of GMO regimes when what we need is a common approach," Green MEP Rebecca Harms said.

Bio-tech industry association EuropaBio said in turn the legislation would hurt innovation because it allows member states to challenge GMOs "on non-scientific grounds."

GMO foods have sparked widespread suspicion in the EU on health and environmental grounds even though the crops have won repeated safety clearance and are imported into the EU in large amounts for animal feed.

Several GMO crops have won EU approval but only

Monsanto's MON810 maize is still grown after it was first cleared in 1998, with two other corn types plus BASF's Amflora potato abandoned.

In 2013, US biotech giant Monsanto said it would no longer seek clearance for new GMO products in the EU.

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APA citation: EU lawmakers pass controversial GMO food law (2015, January 13) retrieved 17 June 2021 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-01-eu-parliament-gm-crops.html>

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