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EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT BACKS DOWN ON GMO DIRECTIVE

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Friends of the Earth

As soon as all the amendments to David Bowe's Draft Recommendation for a Second Reading of the proposal to revise Directive 90/220/EEC became available on Friday 7 April, it was immediately clear that deals had been struck between the Socialists (PSE) and the Christian Democrats/Conservatives (PPE) which would most likely result in a considerable weakening of the European Parliament's original position (following first reading) on some of the key issues.

As reported in the previous Mailout (Volume 6, Issue, 2, 15.03.00), on 21 March the EP's Environment Committee had adopted a total of 35 amendments, including re-instatement of many original amendments tabled by rapporteur David Bowe (PSE, UK) and adopted by the Plenary in February 1999. These included positive improvements to the Council's Common Position concerning important points such as antibiotic-resistant marker genes, gene-transfer (or GMO pollution), and civil liability of companies. However, by the deadline of 6 April, a further 17 amendments had been tabled in advance of the Plenary's second reading, some of which were identically-worded amendments from the PSE and the EPP, and which severely undermined the outcome of both the Environment Committee and the result of the first reading in Plenary.

With regard to three key areas of concern to environmental groups and consumer organisations, the climb-down was apparent as can be seen from the following comparisons:

Antibiotic-resistant marker genes

Original amendment (n° 11) adopted in Environment Committee*

Any person, before submitting a notification under Part B or Part C, shall carry out an environmental risk assessment. The information which may be necessary to carry out the environmental risk assessment is laid down in Annex III. Member States and the Commission shall ensure that GMOs which contain genes expressing resistance to antibiotics in use for medical or veterinary treatment are ***not released into*** *the environment.*

Compromise amendments (n° 48 & 52) tabled by Peter Liese (PPE) and David Bowe (PSE)

Any person, before submitting a notification under Part B or Part C, shall carry out an environmental risk assessment. The information which may be necessary to carry out the environmental risk assessment is laid down in Annex III. Member States and the Commission shall ensure that GMOs which contain genes expressing resistance to antibiotics in use for medical or veterinary treatment are taken into particular consideration when carrying out an environmental risk assessment, ***in order to identify and phase out by 2005*** *antibiotic resistance markers in GMOs which may have adverse effects on human*

"EP abandons its commitments to the environment" (Greens/EFA Group)

health and the environment.

Gene Transfer

Original amendment (n° 12) adopted in Environment Committee*

When consenting to a deliberate release, Member States and the Commission shall ensure that measures are taken to prevent gene-transfer from the GMO to other organisms in the environment.

Compromise amendments (n° 38 & 49) tabled by David Bowe (PSE) and Peter Liese (PPE)

When consent is given for a deliberate release, Member States and the Commission shall ensure that every form of effect on the environment caused by gene-transfer to other organisms is accurately assessed. As the degree of environmental impact varies according to the nature of the organism introduced, a separate assessment shall be made in each individual case.

Civil Liability

Original amendment (n° 33) adopted in Environment Committee*

Those legally responsible for deliberate releases of genetically modified organisms shall have strict civil liability for any damage to human health and the environment caused by the releases in question. Before the activities begin, they shall take out sufficient liability insurance to cover such losses as might be occasioned thereby.

Compromise amendments (n° 36 & 46) tabled by David Bowe (PSE) and Peter Liese (PPE)

There may be a wide range of causes of damage to the environment, not only GMOs; EU-wide environment liability rules should therefore be introduced to provide wide-ranging regulation of possible cases of damage; the Commission will, after discussion with the European Parliament and the Council, bring forward a proposal before the end of 2001 which shall include the impact of biotechnology on all areas of the European Union.

(*Amendments adopted in first reading of Plenary, February 1999.)

THE IMPACT OF THE CHANGED MAJORITY

The fact that the result of the vote was so different in first reading and second reading can be attributed to two key factors. First, the elections for the new European Parliament in June 1999 resulted in the Socialists (PSE) losing their previous large majority to the Christian Democrats/Conservatives (PEE), which became the largest party in the assembly with more than 50 seats over the PSE which is now the second largest party. Second, the rules of the Parliament dictate that the amendments in second reading have to be adopted by an **absolute majority**, i.e. more than half of the total 626 MEPs, whereas amendments in first reading must be adopted by a **simple majority**, or half of the members actually in the chamber during the vote. Thus, amendments in the second reading had to achieve a majority of 314 votes in favour in order to be adopted, which was always going to be an up-hill task given that there were never more than +/- 520 MEPs present at any one time during the voting session. This was further compounded by the fact that the vote was extraordinarily broken off with less than 10 amendments (including important ones on liability) remaining by the arrival of Austrian President Thomas Klestil who addressed the assembly for some 20 minutes. When the voting subsequently resumed, an estimated 25+ MEPs had left the chamber, some in protest at Mr. Klestil's presence. Despite protests from rapporteur Bowe and others that this was abnormal practice and that no bell had been sounded to alert Members to return to the chamber in order to vote, the session was nevertheless resumed with a reduced number of MEPs present.

THE PRICE OF CONCESSION

Faced with the possibility that the original amendments of their own rapporteur would be defeated by the Christian Democrats/ Conservatives led by shadow rapporteur Pieter Liese (EPP Germany), Socialist MEPs by and large voted in favour of **both** the original amendments tabled by David Bowe, **and** the identical compromise ones later tabled by both Bowe and Liese.

As a result, Amendment n° 33, which would have imposed strict **civil liability** for any damage to human health and the environment caused by the deliberate releases of GMOs, was defeated since it gained 287 votes in favour (the second sentence of the amendment was dropped). Another positive amendment, n° 45, tabled by the Greens which would have at least imposed liability for GMOs until such time as a horizontal EU liability regime is finally in place was also defeated, achieving 285 votes in favour. The compromise amendment, on the other hand, which contains the much weaker wording that the Commission will bring forward a proposal by the end of 2001 was adopted since it gained the necessary votes (416) under the absolute majority rule.

While it was clear to most observers that the provisions of Amendment 11 did not, as such, really establish a fully fledged liability regime, it was hoped that the Parliament would adopt the amendment in order to negotiate at least a

"Parliament fails European citizens" (Friends of the Earth)

binding deadline in the conciliation procedure for a Commission proposal on environmental liability. Instead, however, MEPs conceded by adopting Amendment 36 (= 46) to a recital in the revised directive which more or less follows the Commission's line of argument, namely that environmental liability should be covered by horizontal legislation since such damage may be caused by *"a wide range of causes"*. While that statement is not technically incorrect, it ignores the fact that the Commission has already promised legislation on environmental liability for more than 10 years, and there is no reason to believe that it will not take another 10 years until the recent White Paper on liability is transformed into real legislation. Thus it may be at least 2010 before producers of GMOs actually face any civil liability charges under the EU's legislative framework.

Further concessions were made by MEPs on amendments calling for measures to prevent **gene-transfer** from GMOs to other organisms in the environment. Whereas the original Amendment n° 12 would have ensured that *"measures are taken to prevent gene-transfer"*, thereby protecting not only organic but also conventional farmers from unwanted GMO pollution, this amendment was defeated (278 votes) in favour of the compromise Amendment 38 (= 49) which achieved 422 votes. Once again, most of the PSE voted for both the original and the compromise amendment.

Finally, a major concession to the biotech industries was made with regard to GMO marker genes conferring resistance to **antibiotics**. Rather than adopting the original, more stringent Amendment n° 11 which aimed to "*ensure that GMOs which contain genes expressing resistance to antibiotics in use for medical or veterinary treatment are* ***not released into*** *the environment*" (which gained 283 votes), MEPs voted by 449 in favour of the compromise Amendment 48 (= 52). The amendment thus adopted lets GMO producers off the hook by foreseeing the "phase out by 2005 antibiotic resistance markers in GMOs which may have adverse effects on human health and the environment" and is, in fact, a step in the wrong direction compared to the Council's Common Position which requires antibiotic-resistant genes that may have adverse effects to be identified and phased out. Furthermore, the wording of the amendment 48 adopted by the Parliament is in conflict with the basic principles of the Directive, in particular the Precautionary Principle to which Article 1 will refer.

Given the number of scientists, international organisations and other bodies* which have expressed their opposition to antibiotic-resistant markers since some time, and given the fact that more than half of the market applications under Directive 90/220/EEC are for GMOs containing ABR markers, this climb-down by the Parliament is indeed a gift to the biotech industry. It is exacerbated by the fact that the GMO companies themselves admit that antibiotic-resistant genes could be either removed, or replaced by less contentious markers.

(* The British Medical Association, Patrice Courvalan of the Institut Pasteur, the UK Advisory Committee on Novel Food and Processes, a representative of the World Health Organisation, to name but a few.)

The Parliament also adopted quite a number of amendments which clearly are of deregulatory nature. Among them was an amendment calling for a centralised authorisation procedure, another exempting even experimental releases of GM pharmaceuticals from the scope of the Directive, and several amendments putting the national Competent Authorities and even the Council under more time pressure.

The biotech industry has, in fact, scored a huge 'own goal' by fighting so hard to avoid key issues such as liability

THE POSITIVE RESULTS

While the Parliament backslid on the above important amendments, even as it stands now the new directive will at least be better in many respects than the current one (which is exactly the opposite of what industry hoped for when it started to push for a deregulation process some years ago). Some significant improvements achieved so far include:

- future legislation will reflect the Precautionary Principle (also foreseen in the recently agreed Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety)
- risk assessment under the new directive will include not just direct and immediate effects of GMOs on the environment and human health, but also indirect and delayed effects
- product approvals will expire after 10 years after registration
- in future, GMO products will have to be unambiguously labelled (as opposed to the current hazy "may contain GMOs" wording).

New Public Register

Another major improvement which industry obviously did not like concerning public registers was adopted in the second reading. Amendment n° 30 to a new Article in the directive requires that *"the location of GMOs placed on the market shall be recorded in public registers"***.** This therefore includes sites where GM plants are grown commercially and thus means that

Greenpeace "disappointed on EP's failure on key issue"

it will be compulsory under the new directive to make available information concerning the location of both experimental and market releases of GMOs.

Export of GMOs

Parliament also adopted several amendments addressing the question of export of GMOs to non-EU MemberStates. This is an issue which the European Union has to act on anyway within the next few years, since the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, which is expected to be signed by the EU and its Member States at the forthcoming 5th Conference of the Parties of the Biodiversity Convention, requires them to do so. However, the Commission and the Council seem to favour implementation of the Protocol by separate legislation rather than by the Deliberate Release Directive.

COMMISSION REJECTS MORE THAN HALF OF THE AMENDMENTS

EU Environment Commissioner Margot Wallström, who participated in the debate in the Plenary late in the evening of Tuesday 11th April, said she wanted a balanced response to these new challenges based on safety and the Precautionary Principle, based on a high level of protection for the environment and human health. However, the Commission was quite intransigent in its opposition to more than half of Parliament's amendments which Mrs. Wallström declared were "unacceptable". These included n° 13, 14 and 28 (exports), 33, 40 and 45 (liability), 22 and 23 (time consent), and 12 (gene transfer). On the other hand, the Commission found that amendments n° 11, 37, 48 and 52 (concerning antibiotic-resistant marker genes) were "acceptable, in principle". "I agree they need to be phased out, which is already foreseen in the Common Position", said Mrs. Wallström.

THE AFTERMATH OF THE PLENARY

While environmental and consumer groups, Green MEPs, as well as many from other political parties, expressed their disappointment on some of the key issues such as liability, EuropaBio, the lobby group of the biotech industries, declared that the outcome was "a huge 'yes' vote for us" *(Paul Muys, EuropaBio communications director quoted in The Times)*.

On the other hand, rapporteur David Bowe, saw it differently, particularly with regard to the question of liability which EuropBio lobbied intensively against, saying that more than 50,000 jobs would be lost since companies would leave Europe rather than accept a liability regime. "In the face of pressure from industry and the European Commission, GM liability has been kicked into touch one again", Bowe said. "GM companies says their products are safe, but today's vote shows they are not prepared to put their money where their mouth is" *(quotation: Reuters)*. "The question now is, if the industry is not prepared to take full responsibility for what it produces, why should consumers have any faith in these products?" he asked *(quotation: Yorkshire Post)*.

The Green French Environment Minister Dominique Voynet has already expressed her disappointment at the result of the Parliament's second reading

Many observers agree that the biotech industry has, in fact, scored a huge 'own goal' by fighting so hard to avoid key issues such as liability. The credibility of companies producing GMOs is bound to be even further thrown into question as a result, with an inevitable backlash from consumers and civil society in general who will continue to resist GM foods.

CONCILIATION

The process now moves into the conciliation stage between the Parliament and the Council, with the Commission acting as 'facilitator'. Since the rapporteur is clearly not happy about the liability issue, and the Parliament seems both unimpressed by the White Paper and also sceptical about the Commission's ability to push forward horizontal legislation quickly enough, it will no doubt be one of the bargaining chips. It will also be interesting to see if the conciliation procedure may strengthen the position with regard to antibiotic-resistant marker genes.

The conciliation process will start during the coming weeks and may take several months before it is completed. A potentially significant factor is that the EU Presidency will change midway during the process (1 July) from Portugal to France, which is one of the group of five Member States currently supporting a moratorium against any further GMO approvals. The Green French Environment Minister Dominique Voynet has already expressed her disappointment at the result of the Parliament's second reading. In a press release, Mrs. Voynet said that she regretted the fact that the EP's Conservative majority had not seized the opportunity to strengthen the text, and announced that she would do everything she could during the conciliation procedure to achieve a directive which protects consumer health and the environment.

Conciliation should result in a

GENETICALLY MODIFIED CROPS - GOOD FOR WHOSE HEALTH?

Common Project agreed by the Parliament and the Council which is put to a third reading in the Plenary, which MEPs can approve or reject by absolute majority. If no Common Project is achieved during Conciliation, the Council (by qualified majority, i.e. number of votes weighted by size of Member State) can (re)adopt its Common Position plus some of the amendments adopted by the EP in second reading. The Parliament would then vote on this Common Position (+ amendments), and either approve by simple majority or reject by absolute majority.

The final vote in Parliament is expected to be around September. *(DL/GL)*

In a desperate effort to reverse its failing fortunes, the biotechnology industry and its supporters are putting their faith in the 'second generation' of genetically modified (GM) crops. It is claimed that many of these will bring consumer benefits by offering foods with enhanced nutritional value (so-called 'functional foods'). Other genetic modifications to the nutritional composition of crops are intended to facilitate food or animal feed production or provide ingredients for other industrial uses from cosmetics and personal healthcare to biodegradable plastics and biofuels.

A new report, ***"Biotech the Next Generation - Good for Whose Health?"*** by Sue Dibb of the Food Commission and Sue Mayer of GeneWatch UK, challenges the claims that consumers in either the developed or the developing world have much to gain from the GM foods in the pipeline.

The report reveals that:

- Most second generation GM crops are targeted at making food processing easier or cheaper, such as genetically modified oils to make chocolate and margarine, or ingredients for animal feed, cosmetics and biodegradable plastics.

There is little evidence that foods with enhanced nutritional characteristics ('functional foods') have a significant role to play in improving public health

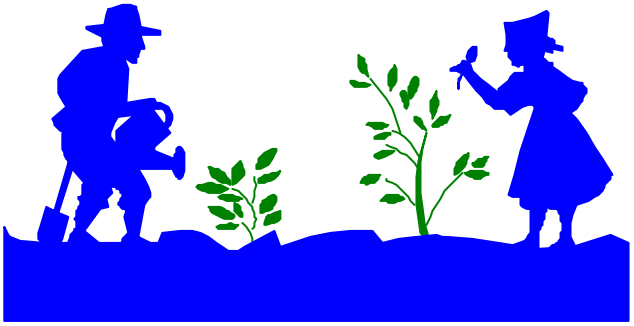
- In the developed world, there is little evidence that foods with enhanced nutritional characteristics ('functional foods') have a significant role to play in improving public health. GM 'functional foods' are unlikely to find a market in developed countries and will generally be more expensive although they may provide cheaper sources of ingredients, such as beta-carotene or vitamin E, for food fortification or food supplements.

- In the developing world, crops with increased levels of vitamins (such as vitamin A rice) may have a role to play, but this should not be overstated. Such crops are many years away from being available to farmers and alternative solutions to poor diets exist that have wider health benefits. Progress towards the elimination of micronutrient deficiencies in developing countries is hindered, not by lack of GM foods, but by political, economic, cultural and social factors.

- Despite its obvious consumer benefit, only limited work has been undertaken to remove allergens from allergy-triggering foods such as peanuts, rice and milk.

The report also identifies the need for improved regulations. The application of GM to the nutritional composition of foods involves altering the plant's basic biochemical process by modifying the synthetic pathways which determine its chemical composition. This lead to the production of not only the expected compound but also unexpected ones. As yet, appropriate testing systems to identify unintended alterations and their significance have not been defined or agreed upon and the concept of substantial equivalence has failings in this regard.

The report also identifies a lack of legislation addressing claims for functional or nutritionally altered foods whether GM or not. Claims that a food is 'healthy' or has some general nutritional benefit do not have to be substantiated. However, the impact any such altered foods may have on the overall diet of those consuming them - particularly for 'at risk' groups such as in-



THE NEEM PATENT CHALLENGE

On 9-10 May, the European Patent Office in Munich will conduct an "Oral Proceeding" to hear the arguments of both sides in the case of a patent granted to the United States Department of Agriculture and the multinational corporation W.R. Grace for a method of controlling fungi on plants by the aid of an extract of seeds from the Neem tree. The hearing provides an important opportunity to examine the problem of BIOPIRACY, the appropriation of biological resources and knowledge from the South through the patent system.

Background

On 12 December 1990 the multinational agribusiness corporation W.R. Grace of New York and the United States Department of Agriculture, Washington DC, filed a European Patent application with the European Patent Office (EPO) on the basis of a U.S. priority application of 26 December 1989, covering a method for controlling fungi on plants by the aid of a hydrophobic extracted neem oil.

After a very difficult and highly controversial examination procedure, the grant of a European patent for this application was published on 14 September 1994, the main claim having been restricted by the EPO to:

"A method for controlling fungi on plants comprising contacting the fungi with a neem oil formulation containing 0.1 to 10% of a hydrophoobic extracted neem oil which is substantially free of azadirachtin, 0.005 to 5.0% of emulsifying surfactant, and 0 to 99% water."

Legal Opposition

In June 1995, a legal opposition against the grant of this patent was filed by Magda Aelvoet, MEP, on behalf of the Green Group in the European Parliament, Brussels, Dr. Vandana Shiva, on behalf of the Research Foundation for Science, Technology, and Natural Resource Policy, New Delhi, and the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements, based in Germany.

The Opponents submitted evidence to the EPO that the fungicidal effect of hydrophobic extracts of neem seeds was known and used for centuries on a broad scale in India, both in Ayurvedic medicine to cure dermatological diseases, and in traditional Indian agricultural practice to protect crops from being destroyed by fungal infections. Since this traditional Indian knowledge was in public use for centuries, it would seem that the patent application in question lacked two basic statutory requirements for the grant of a European patent, namely novelty and inventive step. In addition, the Opponents charged that the fungicidal method claimed in the patent was based on one single plant variety (*Azadirachta indica)* and hence resulted in at least partially monopolising this single plant variety. Since the European Patent Convention (EPC) explicitly prohibits the patenting of plant varieties, the patent should therefore be revoked.

EPO's preliminary statements

In a first preliminary statement of 30 September 1997, the Opposition Board of EPO held that in summary, it appeared that "*the present patent cannot be maintained"* in view of the [evidence supplied by the Opponents] for lack of novelty and inventive step. Moreover, the content of [additional evidence filed by the Opponents] could *"possibly form a very relevant prior art with regard to the inventive step."*

In a second preliminary statement of 15 June 1999, the Opposition Board of EPO held that, according to evidence supplied by the Opponents, it appeared that *"all features of the present claim* (of the patent) *have been disclosed to the public prior to the patent application during field trials in the two Indian districts Pune and Sangli"* of Maharashtra, Western India, in summer 1985 and 1986. Furthermore, the Opposition Board held that on the basis of other evidence supplied by the Opponents, it appeared to be *"mere routine work for a skilled person to add an emulsifier in an appropriate amount"* and that therefore, *"the present subject-matter was considered not to involve an inventive step."*

(Linda Bullard, President, International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements)

AUSTRIA BANS AVENTIS GM MAI-

On 13 April, Austria's Food Safety Minister, Elisabeth Sickl, officially banned Aventis 'Chardon LL' T25 maize from being cultivated or imported into the country, despite the fact that the product has been authorised under the EU's Directive 90/220/EEC. T25 thus joins the list of other GM maize lines which have been banned by the Austrian government, although this is the first herbicide-tolerant variety (to glufosinate ammonium, commercialised under the brand name 'Basta'). Other insect-resistant GM maize types already prohibited under national law are Novartis Bt 176 (banned for import and cultivation) and Monsanto 810 (banned for import).

Once again, Austria has invoked Article 16 of the GMO directive in banning the Aventis maize. Although the reasons for the action have not yet been officially published, reports indicate that these include the absence of studies on the long-term environmental impacts, gene transfer to other varieties and the long-term effects on the combination of the maize and the herbicide.

DUTCH 'INTEGRAL BIOTECHNOLOGY POLICY'

MINISTERIAL FOURSOME FAILS TO DELIVER

Five days after the European Council of environment ministers adopted a 'de facto' moratorium on market approvals of GMOs on 25 June 1999, as well as a common position on the revision of Directive 90/220, the Dutch Minister of Environment announced during a parliamentary debate that the risk evaluation of GMO releases in the Netherlands would be conducted as if the revision of Directive 90/220 had already been completed. The Minister also announced that, in November 1999, together with the Ministers of Agriculture, Public Health and Economic Affairs, he would issue an Integral Biotechnology Policy Document. This policy document would also address the question of several parliamentarians whether to install a broad committee of stakeholders in the public debate on agro-food biotechnology to facilitate a societal discussion on risks and benefits. Now, almost a year later, the Dutch parliament is still waiting for the policy document, although a draft version has recently been leaked. According to media reports, the Dutch government intends, for example, to forbid the use of antibiotic-resistance genes in GM crops for fear that present image of Dutch agricultural produce might be damaged. However, the final word has not yet been said as the four ministers still have to come to a final agreement.

The Minister of Environment

Until now, the Minister of Environment has not issued any permits for field trials of GM plants for applications that have been submitted last year. The official procedural term has now been passed and, according to NIABA (the Dutch biotechnology industry interest organisation) the applicants, which include ZenecaMogen and Advanta/VanderHave, are now considering appealing to the Council of State. As to why it takes so long to issue the permits, the spokesperson of the Ministry told the press that against the background of present public controversy, applications for field trials are being reviewed with great scrutiny. Whether the Minister will issue the permits before the start of this year's growing season is not yet clear. If so, there still is a legal option for objectors to request the Council of State to suspend and eventually to withdraw the permits.

Furthermore, the Minister of Environment also halted the Dutch potato starch co-operative AVEBE. A permit for the application in 1999 to multiply the amylopectin GM potato in the field was not granted, probably because the EU's Scientific Committee on Plants (SCP) indicated in October 1998 that the risk evaluation of the amikacin-resistance gene was inadequate, although the Dutch Minister's own biosafety advisory committee, COGEM, did not agree with the SCP. AVEBE, however, had assumed it would obtain an extension of a permit from the Dutch Minister just as in previous years and had therefore already planted GM potatoes on 1850 hectares but had to recall and destroy them. Dr. Kuipers (who is one of the SCP's members), in his capacity as research director of RIKILT, a Dutch research institute, was asked by the Minister in early 1999 to provide advice. COGEM felt bypassed and upset. So, in 1999, AVEBE was not allowed to multiply the amylopectin GM potato in the field. Neither did AVEBE obtain permission to sell thousands of tons of by-products as animal feed ingredients that resulted from 'field trials' since 1996. AVEBE has calculated their financial loss at about 7M Euro. On the other hand, KARNA and Hettema, two other players from the Dutch potato conglomerate, have multiplied the amylopectin GM potato on a couple of hundred of hectares under multiyear permits that were issued in earlier years. At the end of 1999, these permits expired and Hettema has applied for a permit starting in 2000. The Minister of Environment still has to decide, perhaps because he wishes to adequately apply the Precautionary Principle that has been incorporated into the Biosafety Protocol with his full consent. Returning home after the Montreal negotiations, he seemed as pleased as the environmental organisations.

The Minister of Agriculture

In January 2000, the US ambassador convened a high profile international conference on biotechnology in The Hague. In the media warm-up prior to the conference, the Dutch Minister of Agriculture said he felt annoyed by the simplistic course Greenpeace and other NGOs had been following. At the conference, he made a plea to also look at the potential benefits of biotechnology, as it is a key technology for the 21st century (a position he has reiterated many times during the last few months). He also urged food manufacturers and retailers to comply with European rules for labelling of GM food.

In the meantime, the Ministry of Agriculture is leading the initiative to organise a societal debate as demanded by Dutch parliament in June 1999. In February 2000, a draft report on the exploration of the conditions for such a debate concluded that most stakeholder parties would support the organisation of such a debate. Although most parties have a clear position and are willing to share views with other parties, it is not fully clear to what extent parties are prepared to change views on the basis of other parties' arguments, according to the draft report. On the other hand, most parties felt that if they commit themselves to a serious debate, the government should not

ignore its outcome. The draft report also reached the conclusion that most parties feel a sense of urgency; the debate should therefore start before summer 2000.

The Minister of Public Health

Many editorial comments in the Dutch press viewed the conference in The Hague organised by the US ambassador as a PR roadshow to convince Europeans that there is nothing wrong with GM food. At the conference, the Dutch Minister of Public Health said that all Dutch ministers should speak the same language but this is not always happening so far. For instance, since the Minister of Agriculture has not licensed the production alpha-glucosidase by transgenic animals, the company Pharming has moved production to facilities in Belgium. On then other hand, Dutch physicians in Rotterdam are studying whether the product is an effective therapy against Pompe's disease, a degenerative muscle disorder. In general, the Minister of Public Health views medical applications of biotechnology as full of promise but she notes consumer reluctance when it comes to food applications. The recommendation was therefore to proceed with caution and to have balanced discussions on the pros and cons.

The Minister of Economic Affairs

The Minister of Economic Affairs does not seem to have any more time left for caution as she has a strong view that The Netherlands should not lose the biotech race. At the conference in The Hague, the Minister announced that 45M Euro would be put in a fund to start up biotech companies. Recently, at BIO 2000 in Boston, the Minister said that The Netherlands offers an attractive climate for biotech (start-up) companies. According to the Minister, although there is public opposition, it is declining especially when it comes to health care applications. It is a challenge for industry to dispel scepticism regarding food applications by providing information and engaging in open discussions. In an open letter from a coalition of Dutch NGOs to the Minister, in response to the draft report on the explorative phase of the societal debate, the Minister has been urged to earmark a substantial amount of the 45M Euro for critical research on, for example, ecological adverse effects.

Integral biotechnology policy and societal debate

Given the differences in views and attitudes of the four ministers involved in drafting an Integral Biotechnology Policy, it will not be easy to reach agreement on a final draft before summer 2000. Recently the Minister of Education has also become involved. Whether this will make things easier is doubtful. A few members of Dutch parliament have already said the document comes much too late. The Minister of Economic Affairs recently said not to expect that Dutch biotechnology policy would dramatically change. However, the present Minister of Environment in particular seems to take a quite difference stance compared to his predecessors, as under his authority no permits for field trials with transgenic plants have been granted yet. It remains to be seen whether he can stand the pressure from his colleagues who all favour a rapid development of biotechnology. Moreover, it remains to be seen whether the four ministers under the leadership of the Minister of Agriculture are prepared to organise the societal debate on agro-food biotechnology in a fair and open way, and whether it will take off before summer 2000. According to the draft report on the explorative phase of the debate, most stakeholder parties view as an important condition to engage in a serious debate that the government should not ignore its outcome. But the debate still needs to be organised, while the government recently

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