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From The Times

June 13, 2007

Rules on GM-free food relaxed as Europe lowers the purity standard

David Charter and Valerie Elliott

The definition of GM-free food was relaxed last night as European ministers decided to allow a greater proportion of genetically-modified material into products that could still be labelled “GM free”.

EU agriculture ministers decided that food could include up to 0.9 per cent of genetically-modified organisms (GMOs) instead of the 0.1 per cent currently used as the gold standard by leading supermarkets. Ministers also agreed a Europe-wide system for labelling foods as organic so long as they contained at least 95 per cent organically-produced material – the same threshold already in use in Britain.

The 0.1 per cent figure for GMOs represents the lowest trace detectable and green campaigners believe that it forces producers to do all they can to keep their food “pure”.

Although it will remain prohibited to use GMOs knowingly in organic farming, adopting a 0.9 per cent threshold for labelling food “GM free” will encourage lower standards in keeping produce truly organic, they argued.

Mariann Fischer Boel, the EU Agriculture Commissioner, said that it would be too costly for farmers to achieve higher purity in their organic produce.

Ms Boel said: “It can be very tempting to say ‘zero tolerance’ but that wouldn’t work in real life. To avoid accidental contamination it would be so expensive to produce organic products that it would damage the market completely. It would simply kill the sector.”

Helen Holder, GMO campaigner at Friends of the Earth Europe, said that the ministers had opened the door for more GMOs in organic food, arguing that “accidental or technically unavoidable” contamination would be routinely interpreted as meaning “acceptable”.

She added: “Now that the EU has declared traces of genetic contamination in organic crops acceptable, organic farmers will find it increasingly difficult to keep their crops GM-free.”

“The EU must urgently introduce cross-border legislation to protect organic and conventional farmers from genetic pollution.” Marco Contiero, of Greenpeace, added: “The lax attitude taken by the European Commission and some member states disregards the preferences of European consumers and may put the whole organic sector at risk.”

“In practice, low levels of genetically modified material could start slipping into all organic food.” Food industry experts, however, were last night confident that supermarkets would maintain their stricter 0.1 per cent threshold for GM material in organic produce. This standard is also the one accepted by the Soil Association, the UK’s leading organic certification scheme, and is the threshold that also operates in Austria and Italy.

A new EU logo to denote organic foods, however, will make it easier for shoppers to find organic produce in supermarkets. But as it is not due to come into force until January 2009, many producers are hoping that the EU will speed up the design of the logo so that they can use it voluntarily before that date.

Francis Blake, president of the International Federation of Organic Agriculture in the EU, and standards officer at the Soil Association, said that, although organic associations strived for 100 per cent organic ingredients, there were some products that did not have an organic status. These include acorns, passion fruit, dried raspberries, dried redcurrants, Persian peppers, horseradish seed, fructose, rice paper, some pea proteins, sugars and starches.

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cent organic oat flakes could be described as 80 per cent organic but it would not qualify for the EU logo.

The new standards, however, make it easier to introduce farmed fish products under the organic label. In Britain farmed salmon is already certified by the Soil Association and the Organic Food Federation.

Lawrence Woodward, director of Elm Farm Research, said that he hoped the new labelling system would be subject to strict inspection rules. He said that the EU had not yet agreed these implementation regulations.

Acquired taste

— The organic food market in Britain is worth almost £1.6 billion annually

— It grew by 30 per cent last year, compared to a 3 per cent growth for all UK food and drink sales

— Two out of three British consumers now knowingly buy organic food

Source: Soil Association

rule is, if you're not here by midnight, you won't get served



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