

A new fruit garden for Europe?

Svetla Nikolova, AGROLINK Association and GMO free Coalition

1. Strict legislation without control.

The Bulgarian GMO Act includes some very strict requirements – a ban for some important crops to grow as GM varieties; the protection of National Ecological Network, and the 30-kilometers surrounding belt, from cultivation of GM crops; a contamination threshold of 0,5 - lower than EU standards. Three representatives of Bulgarian civil society movement against GMOs are members of the Consultative Commission on Genetically Modified Organisms at the Ministry of Environment and Water. The Bulgarian legislative framework thus seems favourable for the supervision and limitation of GMOs in the environment and in the food chain. Several clauses of the Act are effectively moratoria in principle with regard to EU laws. In theory therefore, the situation is very positive.

Concerns and expectations of civil society organizations

The law

Official statement The Act has been in force since 1st of June 2005. Two Regulations for implementation of the Act were adopted in October 2005. But there are some problems concerning implementation:

Problems

Administration capacity:

- No administration seems to have been designated as a monitoring body to ensure implementation of the Act. The Consultative Commission, which should in theory oversee implementation, was established 17 months after the Act was adopted, in September 2006.
- Present administrative capacity is insufficient to ensure implementation of the law.
- Notification forms are not approved.

Deliberate release

Official statements

According to the Ministry of environment and ISAAA, (The International Service for the Acquisition of Agri-biotech Applications) no growing of transgenic plants occurred in Bulgaria in 2006.

Problems

At the same time some of the companies have reported that GM crops have in fact been grown, in particular oilseed rape. In addition, company seed lists for 2006, such as Monsanto, list GM

hybrids (Roundup Ready maize for example). At meetings with farmers AgroLink was told that is very easy to buy GM seeds and there is no strict control on the selling of GMO seeds in Bulgaria.

Labeling and food control

Official statements

Labeling is part of the Act on Foodstuff. The Ministry of Health has responsibility for control and monitoring for labeling food containing GMOs.

Problems

In December 2006, a group of NGOs discovered GM soya for sale in supermarkets. Out of five non-labelled products, three turned contained GM soya.

2. The amendments of the law

Official statements

Bulgaria joined the EU on 1st of January 2007. As an EU Member State, Bulgaria is now obliged to harmonize its legislation according to EU norms.

The official position of the Bulgarian government and the national Assembly is that Bulgaria belongs to the groups with strict opposition to GMO like Austria, Greece, and Hungary.

Problems

Recommendation of experts from old member states.

The report issued in beginning of 2007 of twining project between Germany and Bulgarian Ministries for Environment recommended that the strictest texts of the law be changed and a more liberal position on GMOs be taken. The report also proposes that the “science-based” character of the Commission’s recommendations be followed.

3. Civil society movement

The situation

Coalition GM free Bulgaria

Successful campaign with several victories

Many events, debates, media publications

Problems

Only a few NGOs are active in the GMO campaign.

The farmers unions and associations are not involved in the GMO free movement

4. GM free regions

Currently we have 5 municipalities declared officially as GMOfree (with special declaration of municipality councils)

The campaign continues so we expect more in the future.

5. Expectations

Promised

It is most likely that the government will adopt a ban on MON 810 maize.

Challenge

The strong lobby in favour of GM cotton. The government is ready to allow field trials. Big advertisements on agro fuels, especially GM soya oilseed from the business, investors, government, scientists.

6. GM free regions

Currently we have 5 municipalities declared officially as GMOfree (with special declaration of municipality councils)

The campaign continues so we expect more in the future.

Many local authorities and farmers support us. Even some of the political parties included calls for GMO free regions in their election campaigns for the European Parliament.

At the moment public opinion and policy decisions in Bulgaria are going towards a GMO free Bulgaria.

We hope that the European Commission will take this into account at the European level.

Many people, including policy decision makers, acknowledge that Bulgaria is a new basket full of tasty and healthy fruits for European consumers. This can happen only if the fruits are not GMO.