

**SPEECH/SPEAKING NOTE COMMISSIONER JOHN DALLI
GMOs AND GMO-FREE AGRICULTURE – WHERE DO WE STAND?**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have gladly accepted your invitation to address this 6th European Conference on GMO-free regions. This meeting brings together a large representation of regional governments, farmers, consumers and nature protection organisations as well as NGOs from a number of Member States working on agriculture and food production.

As you know, my responsibilities as Commissioner for Health and consumer Policy include **biotechnology applications on feed, food and cultivation**.

GMO cultivation has implications for the organisation of agricultural production, impacting both on producers' and consumers' choice.

To provide European consumers with a choice between GM food and non-GM food, there should not only be a traceability and labelling system that functions properly, but also an agriculture sector that can provide the different types of products.

The ability of the food industry to deliver a high degree of consumer choice goes hand in hand with the ability of the agricultural sector to maintain different production systems, organic-, conventional- and GMO-cultivation

For some time, an important number of Member States, to be precise: 13 Member States asked in June 2009 for the possibility to opt-out from GM cultivation. Such prospect has also been a long standing demand of the GMO-free regions movement.

Moreover, experience with GMO cultivation so far shows that Member States needed more flexibility to organise the co-existence of GM and other types of crops.

The 2003 Recommendation advised Member States to limit co-existence measures to comply with the 0.9% labelling threshold of GM presence in other crops.

However, some Member States have adopted national co-existence measures that aim at reaching levels of presence of GMOs in other crops **lower than 0.9% to avoid potential economic losses**.

Furthermore, the presence of traces of GMOs in particular food products may cause economic damages to operators who would wish to market them as **non containing GMOs**.

The Commission has carefully analysed such experiences and listened to Member States' and stakeholders' demands. On 13 July, I presented a new approach allowing Member States to decide whether to allow, restrict or ban the cultivation of GMOs on part or all of their territory.

As a first immediate step, which is already in force since that date, the Commission adopted a more flexible "**Recommendation on Co-existence**". This Recommendation better reflects the possibility for Member States to adopt measures to avoid GMO presence in conventional and organic crops.

In particular it recognises that for certain category of products – organic products or products labelled as GM free - an adventitious presence of GMOs even at very low level can be problematic. In order to preserve these particular products, the new Recommendation underlines the possibility for Member States to put in place coexistence measures whose aim is to achieve the lowest possible adventitious presence of GMO in other products.

Furthermore, the new Recommendation refers for the first time explicitly to the possibility for Member States **to establish GMO-free areas**. From the experience gained in the last years, the Commission has observed that under certain economic and natural conditions, coexistence of GM, conventional, organic crops is not possible. In these circumstances the Recommendation recognises the possibility for Member States to restrict GMO cultivation from large areas of their territory.

I am confident that these new Co-existence Guidelines achieve the right balance as regards GM and non-GM farming.

As a second step, granting genuine freedom for Member States to decide on GMO cultivation involves a **legislative change**. This is the most legally secure way to give Member States a say on GMO cultivation, on grounds other than scientific risk assessment.

The co-decision proposal for this legal change is part of the package adopted on 13 July. Discussions on this proposal have started at Council and will soon be launched at the European Parliament too. I hope that you will support the proposal and we can achieve an agreement in the near future, so that the legislation can enter into force in 2011.

With this new freedom given to Member States to decide on GMO cultivation, a strong signal is sent to citizens that Europe takes into account their concerns.

Let me make clear at this point that the strict EU-wide authorisation system, which is based on science, safety and consumer choice, remains fully in place. This means that a very thorough safety assessment and a reinforced monitoring system are priorities in GMO cultivation and are therefore being pursued vigorously.

Work on the particular areas for **improvement of the implementation of the GMO legislation** identified by the 2008 Environment Council conclusions is ongoing since.

The Commission is committed to follow up actions on those conclusions before the end of the year:

- EFSA will finish the update of the guidelines for the **environmental risk assessment** in November 2010. These guidelines will have normative value after receiving Member States' endorsement;
- Furthermore, EFSA is engaged in dialogue with Member States and stakeholders and has created a network of Member States' experts to exchange scientific knowledge and experience. It goes without saying that EFSA considers all Member States' comments during the entire risk assessment process;
- Very importantly, and as encouraged by the Commission, EFSA will continue to strengthen the examination of the **independence of its experts**;

- The **Commission report on socio-economic implications** of GMO cultivation will be ready by the end of 2010. This report, based on contributions from Member States, covers also more general aspects of GMOs such as potential benefits or effects on third countries;
- My services are also examining further options to reinforce monitoring of environmental effects of GM crops. This will provide proper feedback to our scientists so that they are able to improve their assessments.
- Lastly, the **recent incident** related to the presence of **a non authorised GM potato in the authorised potato Amflora** shows that controls on the cultivation of GM crops have to be very strict. In the present case, the Commission and Member States have immediately taken action to address the issue.

With these initiatives, in combination with the new cultivation proposal, the EU-wide authorisation system will be maintained and **further improved** to ensure the protection of consumers and the environment.

The functioning of the internal market is obviously preserved for GM food and feed. But it is also the case for seeds. Under the new approach, it will **not be possible to limit or forbid the free circulation of GM and non-GM seeds** even in the areas in which GMO cultivation will be banned.

There are various studies pointing at conflicting conclusions on the use of agrochemicals on GM crops. Yields and financial returns of GMO cultivation vary also among crops and regions. A more comprehensive understanding is needed.

The **independent risk assessment** will certainly **remain the starting point** of our authorisation procedure, but I want the **potential advantages and disadvantages** for society to be fully considered and explained to the citizen. This is crucial in order for us to take advantage of the potential of GM technology and the for the consumers to make a fully informed choice towards this technology.

Innovation is one of the principle drivers for the European Union, as it is through innovation that Europe remains relevant in the global world. However, **innovation** needs to be in tune with the broad values of the society and adequately match the demands of EU citizens ->this is what I call "**Responsible Innovation**"!

Responsible innovation must be underpinned by both **resolute safety** and **clear benefits for the consumer**.

Responsible innovation is especially relevant in the area of GMOs.

Let me clearly state, that for GMOs the European Union applies **a very strict – to our knowledge THE STRICTEST - authorisation system**, which is based on science, safety, and consumer choice. This system will be preserved and even reinforced in the near future.

To this end, I believe that the real debate on GMOs should focus on facts, through open and transparent dialogue.

Let me turn now to the issue of GM feed. Here, facts are very telling: in the EU, the vast majority of feed (85-90%) is labelled as GM. Up to 95% of soybean imports are labelled as GM. These proportions have constantly increased parallel to the expansion of GM cultivation in third countries.

The reasons for the use of GMOs in feed are mainly:

- The EU livestock sector is dependent on imports of feed materials from North and South America –mainly soybean but also maize;
- The limited substitution possibilities for soybean as source of proteins;
- The increasing proportion of GMO acreage and the growing range of GMO events in exporting countries. This in turn limits the alternatives and raises the cost of non-GM supply.

Against this background, the Commission services are currently considering a proposal for a "technical solution" for the **Low Level Presence (LLP) of unauthorised GMOs in feed, for which an authorisation in the EU is pending.**

The objective would be to harmonise the methods for sampling, analysis and the interpretation of results by official control services of the Member States.

This "technical solution" **would not change the zero tolerance** approach to unauthorised GMOs, but make it more operational. It would define the lowest limit at which one can ensure that the controls will be sufficiently robust thereby providing legal certainty.

But ultimately, this technical solution would reduce the risk of shortages in feed supply and subsequent negative impacts on the competitiveness of the EU livestock sector.

I have given you a brief overview of the latest and upcoming developments; and a few thoughts on the key issues.

Let me conclude by saying, that with this new freedom given to Member States to decide on GMO cultivation, I think that **a strong signal is sent to citizens** that Europe takes into account their concerns.

I'm sure that all the participants from different countries present today are vigilant when they consider these questions. GMO technology is the source of **lively debates everywhere.** It is our responsibility of policy makers to face this challenge in a way that answers the expectations and needs of our citizens.

I am confident that the organisations present here today will contribute to the Commission's efforts to find balanced and pragmatic solutions to GMO issues.

Thank you.

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