

USDA Foreign Agricultural Service

GAIN Report

Global Agricultural Information Network

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Report Highlights:

Vocal NGOs and lobbying groups negatively influence Italian public opinion against agricultural technology. The main farmers' union, Coldiretti, is strongly anti-biotech; the food retail sector is reluctant to support biotech policies that might be considered anti-consumer; and Regions—some of which have declared themselves GMO-free—refuse to establish coexistence rules.

Introduction

Some Regions, farmers' unions, and NGOs do not allow planting biotech crops in Italy, due the absence of coexistence rules and to a strong opposition. Although public opinion is generally negative towards biotech food—that is thought to be less healthy and counter to Italian culinary and cultural traditions—the opposition may not be as strong as some believe. Pro-biotech policies currently are not politically expedient. However, eventually they may become economically necessary.

Coexistence

Thus far, neither the central government nor the Regions have established coexistence legislation. The issue is the subject of a seven-year series of legal battles. The Regions are responsible for establishing agricultural policy, including coexistence rules. In April 2012, the Italian Region Committee—representing Italy's 22 Regions and Autonomous Provinces—requested that the Ministry of Agriculture invoke the safeguard clause to ban the cultivation of EU-approved biotech crops in Italy. This is the second time the Regions have called on the Ministry to impose a full moratorium on biotech cultivation. The former Minister of Agriculture approved the first request and committed himself to invoke the safeguard clause (GAIN IT1127) but did not follow through.

Regions' second request likely resulted from the Italian Minister of Environment Clini's interview in which he publicly endorsed biotechnology and the EU "opt-out" proposal that would allow each Member State to decide whether to cultivate EU-approved biotech crops. The Regions request that the Ministry invoke the safeguard clause to prohibit the use and/or sale of GMOs on Italian territory, in order to protect organic production and Geographical Indications. However, the request does not provide any new or additional scientific information indicating the EU-approved biotech crops to be a risk to human health or the environment (as required by Directive 18/2001/EC). Moreover, the Regions request that the Minister of Agriculture convey to the Italian Minister of Environment (at future EU meetings) the unanimous opposition of the Regions and Autonomous Provinces to biotech cultivation in Italy. Lastly, the Regions ask the Ministry to amend national Decree 224/2003 (which implements the EU Directive 18/2001) making them entirely responsible for promulgating coexistence regulations.

Seeds for planting

Italy applies a “zero tolerance” for adventitious presence of genetically modified seeds in conventional lots. The Ministry of Agriculture (MOA) controls registration of seed varieties through the National Register and regulates the tolerances for the adventitious presence (AP) of genetically modified seeds in conventional seed lots. Article 1 of the Legislative Decree 212 of April 24, 2001 —formally implementing the EU Directive 98/95— makes seed planting subject to the authority of the Ministry of Agriculture, fixing the general principle that all appropriate measures need to be taken to prevent GM seeds from entering in contact with conventional seeds. For technical purposes, the tolerance level is actually 0.049 percent, or the minimum detectable level.

Low Level Presence (LLP)

In February 2011, EU-27 Member States (MS) approved the so-called “technical solution” to permit higher traces of unauthorized GMOs in animal feed consignments (food has not been included so far). After two postponed votes, MS formed a qualified majority (QMV) in favor of the new rules on low-level presence (LLP). The new LLP policy means that the Commission can now bring in a new 0.1 percent tolerance threshold for unapproved GMO traces in feed consignments. This represents a significant change to the previous "zero tolerance" approach, which essentially relied on the detection of GMO traces at levels below what is scientifically reliable. Although Italy was initially not willing to support the technical solution, it eventually voted in favor of it, addressing the need to harmonize the EU’s import inspection methodology.

Deliberate release of GM

Italy implemented EU Directive 18/2001 via Legislative Decree 334/2003. Among other measures, the Decree moved the responsibility for the deliberate release of GM material from the Ministry of Health to the Ministry of Environment. In addition, the Decree made several ministries responsible for authorizing new biotech events: Health, Labor, Agriculture, Economic Development, and Education, as well as the Interministerial Evaluation Committee (specifically created under the lead of the Ministry of Environment and composed of representatives from the various ministries). Legislative Decree 334/2003 also gave autonomous competence to the above Ministries to use the safeguard clause: “With an emergency act, they can temporarily limit or prohibit the release into the market, the use or sale of a GMO, as such or contained in a product, if, after the date of authorization, based on new information regarding the assessment of environmental risks, or following a new evaluation of the existing information, based on new or supplementary scientific knowledge, they have reasonable grounds to believe that such GM can represent a risk for human, animal health, or the environment”.

Legislative Decree 334/2003, furthermore, specified that the Ministry of Environment should pay particular attention to the compatibility of biotech release with typical and high quality products. This clause is considered by the Italian biotech industry to be inconsistent with the EU legislation that does not identify any incompatibility between biotech crops and typical productions. This issue is highly sensitive in Italy, where traditional “high quality” food items are touted as needing protection from any “contamination” from biotech products.

Field Testing and GMO research

Italy was one of the first European countries to experiment with GM plants and organisms. Therefore, many public and private research projects were launched regarding various crops, such as olive oil, grapevines, cherries, strawberries, reaching more than 250 experimental projects at a national level. Nevertheless, the national political debate on biotech crops (and plants experimentation) gradually deteriorated, reducing Italy’s commitment on GMO’s research and cultivation. Public and private research funding on agro-biotechnology has gradually been cut to zero and currently no GMOs field trial is being conducted in Italy.

In 2001, the MOA issued a Decree banning biotechnology experimentation in agriculture. However, later on, Italy had to transpose the EU Directive 18/2001 on the deliberate release into the environment of GMOs. In 2005, the MOA issued a further Decree establishing the main requirements to evaluate the risk linked to GMO experimental plantings and tasking the Regions to find out crops and sites where GMO field trials could have been conducted. Given such provisions, some Regions in 2008 approved nine crops-site dossiers (citrus, kiwifruit, strawberry, sweet cherry, corn, olive, eggplant, tomato, and grape) to carry out GMO experimentations. Nevertheless, the MOA never implemented a Decree to authorize those experimental sites, due to the absence of coexistence rules. Moreover, many Italian Regions and Provinces have declared themselves “GM-free,” further hampering the scope for new research and plantings.

Traceability and Labeling

Italy implemented traceability and labeling regulations in April 2004. Since then, however, almost no foods have been sold at retail level labeled as GM products, as the food retail sector is reluctant to support biotech policies that might be considered anti-consumer. In 2011, Greenpeace targeted a company producing seed oil after finding in supermarkets some of its products labeled as containing oil produced from GM soy. The association called upon consumers to boycott such products and to read carefully the label before purchasing the products.

Nevertheless, this does not necessarily mean that no GM food products are consumed in Italy. After years of denial, most media and even anti-biotech groups are realizing that most typical Italian Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) products, including Parmigiano Reggiano, Grana Padano, and Parma ham come from animals fed intensively with GM soybean meal. Italy is indeed a net importer of soybean and soybean meal, which represent the main ingredients in animal feed. According to industry estimates, 80-90 percent of total soybean meal is GM, imported mainly from Argentina and Brazil. Italy imports feed corn mainly from other European countries and, hence, it is probably not GM corn.

Biotechnology products market acceptance

Several vocal NGOs and lobbying groups lead the charge against domestic development of biotechnology in Italy, strongly influencing the politicians and consumers opinion. Italy must strike a balance between the productive, economic, and environmental implications of the gene revolution; its position under the “made in Italy” campaign; and its role as a leading organic crop producer. The main farmer organizations are divided in their support of biotechnology. While Coldiretti and CIA have always maintained strong anti-biotech attitudes, Confagricoltura stresses on the Italian agricultural sector need for innovation and biotech research, calling for a more rational approach.

As for the food retail sector, the uncertainty around biotech national policy and the strong opposition from the public opinion, sharply affect supermarket chain marketing strategies, so that several brand names consistently mark themselves as “GMO-free.” According to the 2010 Eurobarometer – Biotechnology report, Italians do not see the benefits of genetically modified (GM) food, considering it unsafe or even harmful. This explains the low percentage (20 percent) of Italians generally in favor of the development of genetically modified food. In addition, the public has strong reservations about animal cloning in food production and Italians do not see the benefits of this science. There is a general feeling that animal cloning in food production should not be encouraged.

Recent FAS Rome reports on agricultural biotechnology:

- IT1210 [Italian farmer on trial for planting GM corn](#)
- IT1211 [Regions Want Italy to Invoke the Safeguard Clause](#)
- IT1223 [Say Yes to GMOs or Italian Agriculture will suffer](#)
- IT1224 [Biotechnology in Italy 2012](#)

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