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Italy's Agriculture Ministry Remains Vocal Against GMOs

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Report Highlights:

The Italian Ministry of Agriculture recently issued a press release in which it heavily criticized the EU Commission's approval of the genetically modified "Syngenta Mir 604" maize variety despite the fact that Italy's livestock, dairy, and poultry sectors are heavily dependent on imported GMO feeds, which are used to produce some of Italy's best known food products, including Parma ham and Parmigiano-Reggiano. Moreover, Minister of Agriculture Zaia has refused, thus far, to sign a decree which would allow biotech field trials in Italy.

General Information:

GMO Feed is a Must

Italy and the EU are major importers of feeds needed for their livestock, dairy, and poultry industries. Sources estimate that more than 80 percent of the soybean meal imported by the EU is genetically modified and that percentage is likely to increase as non-GMO meal becomes more costly and difficult to source. EU Farm Commissioner Mariann Fischer Boel

underscored the EU's dependence on imported GMO feed when she urged Member States to stop blocking GMO import authorizations in order to secure critical feed supplies. Nonetheless, Italy's Ministry of Agriculture continues to be publically against GMOs.

Ministry Criticizes the EU's Approval of "Syngenta Mir 604"

The Italian Ministry of Agriculture's issued a press release in which it heavily criticizes the EU Commission's approval of the processing and marketing of the genetically modified "Syngenta Mir 604" maize variety.

http://www.politicheagricole.gov.it/InEvidenza/20091202_zaiia_mais_ogm.htm

"We (Italy) were strongly opposed to the approval of the "Syngenta Mir 604," and voted against its approval at the European Council. The fact that it will be now allowed in feed and, therefore become part of the food chain, is troubling as this is a sector that we had hoped would be exempt from this type of technology—technology that we know so little about.

We remain opposed to GMOs, and believe that products should have a natural life cycle without being genetically engineered. Above all we work for the consumer so that s/he does not have to witness social unfairness between GMO products for the poor and GMO-free ones for those who can afford it. That is why we shall fight to ensure that the EU adopt a more stringent approach towards the approval and cultivation of Genetically Modified Organisms."

It appears that the Ministry is unaware the GMO feedstuffs long ago entered the Italian food chain, where they provide the basic ingredients for Italy's livestock, dairy, and poultry sectors whose products are eventually processed into Parma ham, Parmigiano-Reggiano, and other Italian renown Italian foods (often in violation of their stated production processes and procedures). Additionally, American consumers have some of the highest per capita incomes on the planet and are major consumers of biotech foods, while poorer consumers largely are unable to obtain the benefits of GMO food due to various unscientific beliefs or 'superstitions' as Italy's Nobel laureate Rita Levi Montalcini describes them.

EU's biotechnology regulatory system

The EU's biotechnology regulatory system remains unworkable and continues to create trade problems for U.S. biotech products. Split committee votes on GMO import authorizations have allowed the lengthy approvals process to stall, pending Council votes, which are often long-delayed.

In 2006, the World Trade Organization issued a favorable finding in the U.S. case against the EU's moratorium on the approval of biotech products. In March 2008, the United States established a set of benchmarks and timelines that we will use to evaluate the EU's progress toward normalizing trade in biotech products. The continued decline in agricultural biotechnology research in Europe calls into question the EU's ability to meet the agricultural challenges of the 21st Century.

Italian Field Trials Still on Hold

Minister Zaia, who is staunchly anti-biotech, continues to refuse to sign a decree which would allow biotech field trials in Italy. The decree has been on hold since August 2008, while biotech field trials have been banned in Italy for more than ten years.

In 2007, the Ministry of Agriculture passed a Ministerial decree approving biotech field trials, but it wasn't until August 2008, that the then Minister of Environment, Stefania Prestigiacomo, endorsed the protocols. This Ministerial decree is still waiting for the final signature from Minister of Agriculture Zaia, after which it will be published in the Official Gazette.

The Decree established the approval of nine protocols; one each for kiwis, citrus, sweet cherries, strawberries, corn, egg plants, olives, tomatoes, and grapes. The decree leaves it up to each region to develop implementing regulations, including the authority to adopt even more restrictive measures than the original protocols in order "to reduce the risk of contamination." Although most Italian regions have declared themselves to be "GM-free," some regions are open to the

biotech trials, including Lombardy, Veneto, and Emilia-Romagna—all located in northern Italy.

The nine protocols all include stringent measures to prevent any “contamination” to conventional agriculture. Examples of these measures include the required use of anti-birds nets over GM kiwi-trees, a minimum distance of 1,000 meters between biotech and conventional corn fields, hand harvesting of biotech corn, and, in some cases, sterilization of the soil and incineration of the residues. Furthermore, the fields used for the trials must remain idle for up to three years following the trials.

It is not entirely clear whether Minister Zaia or the Ministry speaks for the government on this matter. As Zaia stated at the G8 in Treviso, his opposition to biotechnology is based on his personal belief that biotech is not compatible with the Made in Italy concept, which is marketed as being organic, natural, and traditional—although that may not necessarily be the case.