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EU'S GREENLIGHT TO GM FOODS MEETS WITH IRE IN ITALY

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EU'S GREENLIGHT TO GM FOODS MEETS WITH IRE IN ITALY

(ANSA) - Rome, March 2 - Four genetically modified (GM) crops received the green light from the European Union on Tuesday sparking a chorus of outrage from Italian politicians and environmentalists.

"Not only don't we agree with this decision, but we're not going to let it get in the way of our policy on GM foods," said Agriculture Minister Luca Zaia.

Reiterating that Italy's strict enforcement of a ban on GM foods was a "question of national sovereignty," Zaia said the Italian government would band together with other EU members like France, Greece and Hungary to demand the decision be reversed.

The European Commission's (EC) okay to the Amflora starch potato and three kinds of pest-resistant corn ended an unofficial 12-year moratorium on new GM foods in the EU.

While the Amflora potato is intended for industrial use only, the corn varieties have received the greenlight for human consumption as well.

A statement by EC Health Commissioner John Dalli stressed that the decision followed a "detailed examination" of the products, which determined they presented no significant health risks.

But the agricultural minister's stance found common cause across party lines

with the largest opposition group, the Democratic Party (PD), urging the government to keep GM foods out of Italy.

"The future of Italian agriculture is in high-quality, organic foods, not in genetically modified imitations," said the PD's pointman on the environment, Ermete Realacci.

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Also speaking out on the decision, Italian environmental lobby Legambiente called it "absurd".

"Letting these products go to market will put our health at risk and undermine our economy," said spokesman Francesco Ferrante.

"Italy doesn't want and doesn't need genetically tampered foods," he said.

But National Research Council biotechnologist Roberto Defez said the EC's decision was long overdue and it was time Europe cashed in on the transgenic revolution.

"Last year, 10% of all farmland on Earth was cultivated using genetically modified crops and it's ridiculous for the EU to opt out of such an important new market," he said.

He added that GM products were rigorously tested before being approved and that the EU could help make the process even safer by taking a greater part in it.

The Amflora potato, created by German chemical titan BASF, was modified to create more of a certain kind of starch useful in the paper and plastics industry.

While it has not been approved for human consumption, it has been cleared as feed for animals fuelling worries that potentially overlooked long-term health risks could be passed on to consumers.

In particular, some experts have expressed concerns that a modified protein in the potato neutralizes the effects of a common antibiotic.

However, the European Food and Safety Authority (EFSA) argued that Amflora potatoes contained tiny amounts of the protein too small to interfere with antibiotics and pose no risk for the people who take them.

The three strains of transgenic corn cleared Tuesday have all been approved by the US Food and Drug Administration, despite health concerns that have led to a ban in Germany

But the EFSA maintains that extensive testing has failed to show any connection between the corn and health complications of any kind.

The issue of GM crops is particularly explosive in Italy.

As the second-largest producer of organic crops in Europe and the fourth largest in the world, there is widespread fear of the potential damage resulting from accidental GM contamination.

According to a recent survey by farmers' union Coldiretti, seven in ten Italians believe that GM foods are less healthy than traditional ones.

Coldiretti added that the negative perception of GM foods could hurt Italian food exports by as much as 60% were the government to approve them for use. Photo: Genetically modified Amflora potatoes.

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