

Council eyes renationalised GM cultivation Agra Europe Weekly, 23 March 2009
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A growing consensus has emerged among member states at this week's Farm Council in favour of renationalising GMO cultivation policy.

The Czech presidency said that a "surprising" number of countries reacted positively to a paper from the Dutch government proposing that the choice of whether to cultivate GMOs should be left to individual member states.

In a paper put forward to the Council, the Netherlands suggests that a possible solution to GMO approval issues would be for internal market rules to apply on the import of products - with a decision at EU level. But for cultivation it could be left to each member state.

The Dutch paper warns that 'socio-economic concerns' are not currently being taken into account in the EU approval process.

Nine countries in favour

Around nine countries expressed some form of support for the Dutch paper, welcoming the opportunity to discuss fundamental concerns with the current approval process, sources said.

France, Romania, Poland, Finland, Austria, Cyprus and Luxembourg all offered their support, while Germany was said to be "sympathetic" to the Dutch concerns and Greece welcomed the idea but urged a continued focus on "science".

Spain, Portugal, Italy and Estonia are said to have rejected the Dutch approach, on the back of concerns that it will undermine the internal market.

The Czech presidency said that there was already clear support for renationalising GM cultivation approvals, and that "the number of these member states seems to be growing". Czech Agriculture Minister Petr Gandalovic said that agriculture ministers should have a new input into the approvals debate.

Commission: no mandate for revamp

The Commission, however, showed reluctance to debate the idea of devolving cultivation approval to member state level.

Health Commissioner Androulla Vassiliou, stepping in for the absent Environment Commissioner Stavros Dimas, is understood to have recalled that the current legal framework on GMOs is fully comprehensive.

Environment ministers voted unanimously in December to strengthen the existing system while tweaking its implementation rules, the Commission said. There is therefore no mandate for revamping the approval process, let alone renationalizing cultivation policy, it was argued.

The December conclusions included a contentious paragraph on socio-economic criteria which directed the member states "to collect and exchange data on socio-economic implications of the placing on the market of GMOs, including socio-economic benefits and risks and agronomic sustainability, by September 2009."

The Commission is said to have taken note of the Dutch position, and will use its input alongside that of other member states as it compiles a report on the socio-economic impact of the release of GMOs into the environment.

This report will be presented to the Environment Council by June 2010, member states were told.

Dutch call for new approach

The Dutch paper reiterates the country's support for the internal market, recalling that the Netherlands has in general respected EU safety approvals when voting on GMO applications.

It however urges a new focus on national socio-economic interests -- thought to include concerns over research-related jobs and local food and feed supply factors - in the GMO equation.

The paper reads: "Because of the increased attention in society for GMOs and rapid technological developments the question may be raised whether a distinctive approach on the approval of GMO products and the cultivation of GMOs can provide a solution for the often complex and difficult EU decision making process on GMOs.

"The Dutch government recognises however that the European legislation on GMOs is not taking into account the recent developments and worries in EU-society and socio-economic dimensions of use and market access of GMOs".

"Therefore, the Netherlands urges the Commission to take the initiative to develop proposals on adapting the existing GMO-regulation, taking into account the socio-economic dimensions of GMOs."
