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Amflora: Europe's New Hot Potato

The approval of a genetically modified potato for cultivation in EU territories has sparked strong reactions from all sides of the debate. Many member states and environmental groups are outraged, while the biotech industry sees promising signs of progress.

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The European Commission said its 2 March decision to authorise the cultivation of the genetically engineered Amflora potato was based on repeated favourable opinions from the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA). Only one other GM crop, the MON18 maize variety, has ever been approved for cultivation in the EU, and that was 12 years ago.

According to EFSA, there is only a 'negligible' risk of gene transflow from the GM potato to conventional varieties, and a 'remote' risk that the antibiotic resistance marker gene embedded in Amflora would transfer from the plant to the soil.

Not for Human Consumption

Amflora was developed by the German chemicals giant BASF to provide high-quality starch for industrial uses, such as manufacturing paper, textiles and adhesives. Although the genetically engineered potato is not suitable for food purposes, the pulp left over from the starch extraction process can be used in animal feed. BASF intends to start growing the variety later this year on 250 hectares in the Czech Republic, Germany and Sweden.

The cultivation authorisation comes with three conditions. BASF and the operators involved in the production chain (farmers and starch producers) must ensure that:

- the GM tubers are physically separated from potatoes for food and feed uses during planting, cultivation, harvest, transport, storage and handling in the environment;
- conventional potatoes are not planted in the same field the year following the cultivation of the GM potato; and
- the GM potatoes are delivered exclusively to designated starch processing plants for processing into industrial starch within a closed system.

Member States Object

In principle, it is for member states to decide whether a GM variety can be grown or placed in the market as food or animal feed within the EU. In practice, however, ministers routinely fail to reach the qualified majority required, and the decision ultimately reverts to the commission. In the case Amflora, ten countries voted for, thirteen voted against and four abstained.

Amflora's approval raised a storm of criticism from GMO-sceptic EU governments, such as Austria, Denmark, France, Greece and Luxembourg. Italy's agriculture minister Luca Zaia said that his country would not allow the commission to "question the sovereignty of member states on this issue." Italy may start inspecting vehicles from EU countries that allow GMO cultivation, and possibly restrict or even block some imports. The French government, which disallowed the cultivation of MON18 corn in 2008, is waiting for the opinion of its Haut Conseil des Biotechnologies before deciding whether to prohibit the cultivation of Amflora. Austria's health ministry has already announced a national cultivation ban.

In addition to Amflora, the European Commission also approved three Monsanto GM corn varieties for food and feed uses, but not for cultivation.

Greens Up in Arms, Industry Cautiously Optimistic

Greenpeace spokesman Marco Contiero called it 'shocking' that one of the new commission's first official acts was to "authorise a GM crop that puts the environment and public health at risk." Friends of the Earth warned that there was no guarantee that the antibiotic-resistant element in Amflora would not enter the food chain, while euro-parliamentarian Corinne Lepage said the decision had made EU citizens into guinea pigs and sent a negative signal to European public opinion, which is largely opposed to GMO cultivation, as well as the presence of genetically modified elements in food and feed.

In contrast, some industry representatives see Amflora's approval as a sign that the tide might be turning in Brussels. BASF board member Stefan Marcinowski expressed hope that "this decision is a milestone for further innovative products that will promote a competitive and sustainable agriculture in Europe." DuPont spokesman Mike Hall thought the decision could speed the approval of the company's Pioneer 1570 corn variety, which has been under review since 2001. The commission, he said, was "fed up with the ping-pong political match of this and they're going back to science."

That such could be the case is supported by the commission's statement on Amflora's approval: "Given the high scrutiny that was devoted to this dossier, given the fact that there are presently no new scientific issues which merit a further assessment and in view of the repeated scientific opinions, it is now appropriate to proceed with this authorisation. This is also in line with the principle of responsible innovation."

WTO Trouble Ahead?

Faced with the deep divide between pro- and anti-GMO governments, the European Commission supports giving member states a greater say on whether they want to grow a given GM crop in their territories. While an explicit opt-out clause could speed up the internal approval process, problems loom in extra-European trade.

In 2006, the WTO's Appellate Body ruled that national-level safeguard measures, i.e. cultivation and marketing bans maintained by certain EU member states, were not based on adequate risk assessments. The United States considers that scientific justification for the measures is still lacking and that the EU's approval processes remain too slow. In January 2008, the US requested authorisation to impose retaliatory action, but the proceedings have been suspended. They could be reactivated if more EU member states adopt precautionary bans in the future.

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