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The position of the Plant Biotechnology Unit of EuropaBio

**COEXISTENCE OF GM CROPS WITH NON-GM CROPS
IS POSSIBLE IN THE EU**

Biotechnologies are considered a key pillar of the European Community's "Lisbon Agenda", and collectively, plant science, plant genomics and plant biotechnology is a major component of biotechnology research, science and development. However, in order to benefit from this innovation, it is crucial that the EU and Member States permit different agricultural production systems to co-exist.

This paper considers the issue of the coexistence of growing conventional, organic and GM crops in Europe now that the EU regulatory framework for approving GM crop plants for import and cultivation is completed. Conventional and organic agricultural products may contain some traces of GM material. This reality is recognised by EU legislation on GMOs which sets a Community threshold of 0.9% for the adventitious presence of GM in non-GM products. Establishing thresholds for adventitious presence of one material in another is not a situation unique to GMOs since in the production of food, feed and seed it is practically impossible to achieve products that are 100% pure.

In July 2003 the Commission provided guidance to EU Member States on the establishment of coexistence rules that will provide for choice among different cropping systems and growing techniques. These must be fair and proportional – a primary objective being to enable the non-GM farming community to produce crops below the community 0.9% labelling threshold. EuropaBio supports the Commission's approach, published in the July 2003 guidelines and believes coexistence of GM crops and non-GM crops in the EU is already possible without adopting further prescriptive legislation, be it at EU or national level.

Over the past 15 years plant scientists from private and public institutions have conducted more than 1,500 field trials of experimental GM plant material in the EU. These include large scale field trials in France, Germany, Spain and the UK.

In addition Spanish farmers have for several years been commercially growing GM insect-resistant maize, implementing a stewardship programme that details good farming practices. In 2004 the area seeded to this crop reached 58,000 ha equivalent to 12% of the Spanish maize crop (an increase of 80% over 2003). Neither farmers nor the feed supply chain has experienced any difficulties as a result.

1. Coexistence is about allowing farmers to choose.....

Farmers have practiced coexistence for generations so as to capture the economic value associated with different product types and to meet demands for different types of products. Stewardship through “Good Agricultural Practices” and active dialogue and information among neighbouring farmers and stakeholders in the supply chain enables coexistence to be achieved. This allows for quality standards to be met in different ways in the varied agricultural environments in different parts of Europe.

.....it is not about issues of safety even with GMOs

GM crops that are offered to European farmers have passed stringent food, feed and environmental safety standards prior to their approval for placing on the market and are as safe as their traditionally developed counterparts.

2. Any national or regional coexistence measures must be consistent with other Community legislation

The objective of any national or regional coexistence rules must be to allow different producers to use the cropping system and agricultural techniques they choose. Coexistence measures must be proportionate and non-discriminatory and must not contravene other Community legislation. In particular, Directive 2001/18 requires that Member States do not prohibit, restrict or impede the marketing of EU authorised GM products.

3. Coexistence should target the European Community GM labelling threshold (0.9%)

Coexistence measures must focus on the feasibility and costs of management practices that aim to minimise the unintended presence of GM in non-GM produce. These measures should aim to respect the 0.9% labelling threshold for food and feed, including organic products, recently established in European legislation through the co-decision procedure.

EuropaBio considers that growers who have themselves chosen a more stringent labelling standard than that established in EU legislation should not expect their neighbours to bear the special management costs of meeting that self imposed standard; to do so would reverse fundamental freedoms of economic activity and would establish a dangerous precedent. To allow specialty operators to formulate unrealistic standards for GM in their own produce would impose impossibly high standards on neighbours and would effectively impose a ban on the choice of other producers.

4. EU National laws already provide for recourse to address coexistence related liabilities, whether GM or non-GM related

EuropaBio considers that existing national laws on civil liability already provide the necessary mechanisms to determine fault and assess liability and the need for compensation. Additional Community or Member State liability legislation or funds that single out GMOs are not necessary, and would thus be disproportionate and discriminatory.

In any case, we would point out that damages may also be experienced in GM crops – a high-value GM crop might be “contaminated” by neighbouring conventional or organic fields in which Good Agricultural Practices guidelines were not followed.

5. A pragmatic and flexible approach taking into account Europe’s varied agro-ecologies is needed – not a set of prescriptive, inflexible rules

Flexible, pragmatic coexistence schemes based on good agricultural practices can already be achieved without developing additional national or EU legislation.

EuropaBio supports the Commission’s approach published in the July 2003 guidelines. These provide for a general framework, built on existing agricultural practices, thus

recognising the different needs of different agricultural regions while respecting the principle of “proportionality” in relation to the desired objective – that is, to allow conventional and organically grown produce to meet the Community labelling standard with GM adventitious presence levels below 0.9%.

Such an approach will allow for local measures to be adapted to local conditions on a case by case basis. This will require collaboration between farmers and other operators in the supply chain so that freedom of choice is available for all European farmers and consumers.

6. Thresholds for “Adventitious or Technically Unavoidable Presence” of GM in seed

The issue of coexistence of different production systems is closely linked to the 0.9% labelling threshold for “adventitious or technically unavoidable presence” of GM material in non-GM products. In view of the fact that seeds are the first product in the food/feed supply chain, it is particularly important to establish practical thresholds for adventitious presence of GM seed in non-GM seed. These thresholds should fulfil the objective of providing consumer choice but must not impose disproportionate conditions on seed producers.

7. EU farmers and citizens must be able to share in the proven benefits of GM crops

Today, genetically modified crop varieties are grown by more than 8 million farmers on more than 80 million hectares around the world. Farmers choose to grow GM crop varieties because they offer benefits to themselves, to their rural communities, to their rural environment and to consumers. Confirmed benefits are:

- *food security for small scale growers through insect and disease resistances*
- *increased efficiencies of production*
- *a reduction in farm inputs (e.g. sprays of phytosanitary products and energy consumption)*
- *improved quality of harvested product*
- *improved nutritional value of harvested crop*
- *increased options for diversification of agricultural and rural economies*

Plant research and development now under way will continue to offer a wide variety of field and horticultural crops providing these and additional benefits.

It is crucial that Europeans are allowed the opportunity to exercise choice and to experience these same benefits. In this frame it is worth keeping in mind that the organic area for two major agricultural crops, maize and oilseed rape, is respectively less than 1% and 0.5% of the total EU area planted to these crops. In contrast, Spanish farmers who have been allowed to choose, now grow Bt maize on 12% of their maize area. All EU farmers should be given the choice to share the proven benefits of GM crops.

For further information, contact

EuropaBio

Avenue de l'Armee, 6

B-1040 Brussels

Tel: +32 2 735 03 13 - Fax: +32 2 735 4960

Web site: www.europabio.org

EuropaBio, the European Association for Bioindustries, has 35 corporate members operating worldwide and 21 national biotechnology associations representing some 1200 small and medium sized enterprises involved in research and development, testing, manufacturing and distribution of biotechnology products.