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# Co-existence of genetically modified, conventional and organic crops: Freedom of choice



Conference on GMO co-existence

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Ladies and gentlemen

I am also pleased to be here today. The scale of the event alone demonstrates the considerable interest and importance attached to co-existence.

The issue of co-existence covers several fields: agriculture, trade, competitiveness, environment, and the different services in the Commission work together on this important issue.

Farmers must be able to choose the crops they grow, whether conventional, or organic or other, and have confidence in the quality and purity of their harvested products. Consumers need to know what they put in their shopping baskets and what ends up on their plates. And last but not least, the impact of cultivation of certain crops on biodiversity and the environment must be clearly established.

That is why, as Commissioner for the Environment, I feel highly concerned about co-existence as GMOs lie at the heart of the discussion.

Marianne (Fischer-Boel) has dealt with co-existence in terms of agricultural management and gave us an overview of the measures that certain Member States have implemented to ensure co-existence. This is of course of paramount importance if farmers are to meet strict market demands.

Co-existence is not a new issue. Co-existence measures have long been used in the seed industry for production of high purity conventional stocks and very successfully may I add. The introduction of GM crops has however provided a new challenge in finding the appropriate co-existence measures.

At present, only some 60 000 hectares of GM crops are commercially grown in the European Union. This is largely limited to specific regions of Spain, where two varieties of insect-resistant maize are grown.

At the same time new GM maize varieties are in the pipeline for approval for cultivation. Whether or not farmers subsequently grow such varieties is a matter of choice but again, it remains essential that such GM crops can co-exist with conventional and organic agricultural production.

There are concerns today as to whether co-existence is possible if cultivation of GM crops increases. Organic farmers are particularly concerned about the purity of their products and the damage they may suffer in case of admixture of their produce with GMOs. Various regions in Europe where products of high quality and of controlled origin are produced fear that they will lose their good reputation if GM crops are to be cultivated in proximity. Finally, there are even greater fears about the impact of GM crops on the environment and on biodiversity. In response to such fears, many regions have declared themselves 'GM-free' zones. Certain Member States have also taken further action and imposed bans on certain GM products in an attempt to prevent their cultivation.

We, as politicians, have a duty to take these concerns very seriously and to try to find the appropriate response.

I wish to raise today two major issues which I believe are key to progress not only on coexistence but on the future policy on GMOs in general:

Firstly, I would like to emphasise that Member States should continue to be able to put in place their national measures for coexistence.

And secondly, I would like to explain how the Commission can respond to the concerns raised by Member States and their citizens in the field of GMO policy.

Under the current legislation, coexistence measures rely on the experience of Member States in their own territory. The justification for this situation is obvious.

Co-existence measures must take account of geographical, ecological and climatic conditions given that natural cross-pollination is the key issue.

In her speech, Marianne has explained why it would not be helpful to propose Community rules on co-existence at the current time. It is clear that geography, topography and climate as well as agricultural production systems vary greatly both within and between Member States. It is therefore logical that these differences should be reflected in the national approaches to co-existence. On this basis, national rules devised by Member States themselves are likely to be more effective than harmonised Community rules. At the same time, the Commission is obliged to assess whether national measures are proportionate and in line with EU legislation. In the absence of a definitive framework, it would also be useful for the Commission to give more clarity to Member States in terms of the measures that can and cannot be legally accepted.

Certain Member States have submitted national measures to the Commission which were judged to be legally acceptable. This is very encouraging. Other Member States appear to be experiencing some difficulties, although this is not surprising given the complexity of the issues involved. The Commission should work together with Member States and provide assistance and guidance to help them overcome those difficulties.

As an Environment Commissioner, I am keen to ensure that the environment is protected from potential risks arising from the cultivation of GMOs. Coexistence measures, on top of the benefits they provide in purely commercial terms, can play a role in this respect. They must, however, be complemented by sound risk assessment and risk management practices, which are able to provide the necessary level of confidence and transparency.

This brings me to my second point: how to alleviate the concerns of Member States and the public about the safety of GMOs.

It is essential that new GM crop varieties are fully risk-assessed in terms of their safety and their impact on the environment. It is also imperative that appropriate management measures, including on monitoring and traceability as well as on co-existence, are implemented when such varieties are cultivated. My view is that environmental risk assessment should be beyond reproach.

Directive 2001/18 which covers the deliberate release into the environment of GMOs provides for environmental risk assessment, and so does the new regulation on GM food and feed. This legislation contains specific principles to be followed when conducting such assessment, in order to ensure that all types of potential risks are addressed. In this context, it is vital that not only short-term and direct effects, but also long-term and indirect effects should be assessed.

The Directive also provides for mandatory post-market monitoring, labelling and traceability for GMOs. Finally, it allows Member States to establish co-existence measures.

The Directive contains the basic provisions that would allow us to address risks from the deliberate release of GMOs. However, applications for cultivation of GMO products raise a whole new series of possible risks to the environment, notably potential longer-term effects that could impact on biodiversity. Protected sites or areas, endangered or vulnerable species of plants and animals are of paramount importance in this respect.

No new GM varieties have as yet been approved under the new regulatory framework. And it is essential that we address such potential risks before granting approvals for their cultivation.

Many Member States raised this issue at the last Environment Councils that took place in December 2005 and in March 2006. Many Member States expressed the wish that they should be more involved in the risk assessment procedure. Concerns were also raised about the potential long-term effects that GM crops may have on the environment. These are indeed key questions which the Commission will discuss in an Orientation Debate next week.

Despite the fact that the new regulatory framework provides a sound foundation for risk assessment, we should make sure that the scientific input into that risk assessment is of the highest possible quality. Risk assessment procedures should, therefore, be fine-tuned to the extent necessary.

As you are aware, the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) plays a major role in the risk assessment procedure for GMOs under the new regulatory framework.

EFSA has recently undergone an independent external evaluation to assess both its working practices and to take account of the views of stakeholders at both the Community and national level. The evaluation report, which is publicly available on the EFSA website, indicates that certain changes may be required in its practices concerning risk assessment, including those related to communication and co-operation with Member States.

It is clear that this report will be taken fully into account both by EFSA and by the Commission.

Indeed, if we can alleviate concerns regarding GMO products by improved risk assessment practices and making them more transparent co-existence measures can be established with more confidence. Regions may find it unnecessary to create GM-free zones and Member States may not feel the need to invoke bans to address concerns about the potential risks to the environment.

Before concluding, allow me to make a few additional remarks:

First, it is not hard to see that GMOs have more opponents in the EU, than friends. The low level of acceptance of GM crops will mean that consumer demand for GMOs is not likely to increase and as a consequence farmers will chose to continue to grow conventional or organic varieties in Europe. We must, therefore, persist in looking at the means to continually improve these varieties. Biological techniques may in fact play an important role in this respect. Indeed, marker-assisted-selection or 'MAS-technology' is attracting considerable attention in conventional plant breeding programmes as a 'genetic' tool to ensure that improved characteristics are reliably introduced into new varieties. We should not ignore the use of 'upgraded' conventional varieties as an alternative to GM crops, particularly where similar characteristics can be introduced without genetic modification. We also can not ignore that the need for co-existence measures would become largely redundant if such varieties predominated in agricultural production systems.

However, let me say one word of clarification here: The appearance of GM free zones, not imposed by State measures, but where farmers voluntarily decide not to grow GMOs, should not be questioned. Farmers should remain free to decide not to grow GM crops. This is a matter of individual free choice and can be done in full legality under Community or international trade rules.

Minister, Ladies and Gentlemen,

In conclusion, I would like to stress that protecting human health and the environment are key concerns for the Commission.

Contributing to the establishment of appropriate coexistence measures and improving the quality of risk assessments are essential in this respect.

These should allow us to enhance confidence in the system and hopefully alleviate the concerns of the public regarding GMOs.

Thank you very much for your attention.