

GREENPEACE

European Unit

Disagreement in EFSA opinion puts future of BASF GM potato in doubt

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BRUSSELS, Belgium — The European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) has been unable to reach a unanimous opinion on the use of antibiotic resistance genes in genetically modified (GM) plants. This opinion has significant consequences for the authorisation of BASF's genetically modified (GM) potato and other GM products already on the market.

While acknowledging scientific uncertainties, EFSA's panel on GM crops claims that it is "unlikely" that antibiotic resistance genes in GM crops pose health and environmental risks. However, two senior scientists from EFSA's biohazard panel, which was jointly responsible for the assessment, did not agree with the conclusions and raised serious concerns about adverse effects on public health and the environment.

"We welcome this unprecedented opinion by the EU's food safety authority and its recognition of the uncertainties and disagreements that exist on GM crops within the scientific community. The opinion proves that a wider consultation of scientists is paramount if we are to assess the safety of GM crops,"[1] said Marco Contiero, Greenpeace EU GMO policy director.

In the first ever disagreement within EFSA on the dangers associated with GM crops, the two scientists claimed that "adverse effects [...] cannot be assessed" and that the probability of gene transfers from plants to bacteria ranges widely "from unlikely to high." [2]

EFSA has already expressed a positive opinion on a BASF GM potato, which contains an antibiotic resistance gene, but was forced by the European Commission to re-examine the risks linked to antibiotic resistance, after failing to address persisting legal and health concerns.[3] An EU law from 2001 requires the phase out of antibiotic resistance genes which may have adverse effects on human health and the environment by the end of 2004. According to the World Health Organisation, the gene contained in the BASF GM potato is connected with antibiotics that are vital in the treatment of serious diseases such as tuberculosis.[4]

"BASF had eight years in which to produce a potato without an antibiotic resistance gene, but chose not to in order to save money and time. Authorising it now would be as crazy as restarting the production of cars without seatbelts or airbags. The authorisation of GM products should be based on health and environmental assessments, not on protecting the corporate interests of BASF," said Contiero.

Given the obvious scientific uncertainties associated with antibiotic resistance genes, Greenpeace calls on the Commission to recommend a ban of the BASF GM potato and a withdrawal of all other GM products authorised on the market containing antibiotic resistance genes.

Notes to Editor

[1] The BASF GM potato contains an antibiotic resistance marker gene (ARMG) known as nptII, which conveys resistance to antibiotics.

[2]http://www.efsa.europa.eu/cs/BlobServer/Statement/gmo_biohaz_st_ej1108_ConsolidatedARG_en.pdf (p. 90).

[3] For a detailed analysis of problems linked to the BASF GM potato and for a detailed chronology, see: <http://www.greenpeace.org/eu-unit/press-centre/press-releases2/pr-basf-gm-potato-council-vote>

[4] World Health Organisation, Critically Important Antibacterial Agents for Human Medicine for Risk Management Strategies of Non-Human Use. Report of a WHO working group consultation, 15-18 February 2005, Canberra, Australia

(http://www.who.int/foodborne_disease/resistance/amr_feb2005.pdf). Also see: EMEA - Committee for medicinal products for veterinary use and Committee for medicinal products for human use, Presence of the antibiotic resistance marker gene nptII in GM plants for food and feed uses. EMEA/CVMP/56937/2007. 22 February 2007

(<http://www.emea.europa.eu/pdfs/human/opiniongen/5693707en.pdf>).

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