

New GMO legislation would put 'power in hands' of biotech companies

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News

The European parliament must challenge the council's proposals and uphold strong national genetically modified organism (GMO) bans, argues Mute Schimpf.



If the European Union was to give national governments more powers to ban genetically modified (GM) crops within their borders, one would imagine that environment groups would be celebrating. So why, in the wake of new legislation agreed by the environment council this month that would put these powers into law, do we at Friends of the Earth Europe remain critical?

For decades, many member states have fought against new GM crops and demanded stronger legislation to restrict their use and protect conventional and organic farming. However, instead of granting governments these rights, the new law would instead put regulatory power in the hands of companies who profit from GM technology.

Under the proposals, national governments would lack a solid legal basis on which to ban GM crops in

their countries. Instead, they would be forced to ask biotech companies, like Monsanto and Syngenta, to exclude them from authorisation applications.

This puts governments who oppose GM crops on the back foot against the wishes of the biotech industry.

It may seem counterintuitive that GMO-critical governments were willing to sign up to this law, but the political pressure on them is high. So far, the eight European countries which have banned the cultivation of GM crops have been frequently challenged by the European commission, biotech companies, or by the US via the WTO.

Worryingly, the council's proposals reduce the importance of rigorous scrutiny of the health and environmental risks of GMOs. This represents a weakening of the fundamental precautionary principle underlying European policymaking, and so threatens the safety net that has kept Europe relatively GMO free.

GM crops have been rejected by consumers, supermarkets, and the majority of farmers. Only one type of GM maize is authorised in the European Union - and is grown in just one per cent of its fields - whilst other GM crops have been withdrawn by companies or annulled by the highest European court.

Nobody needs GM crops except the companies that promote them. Instead of risky and unnecessary technologies we need food and farming solutions that provide livelihoods and healthy food, protect biodiversity, and meet the needs of people and the environment - which doesn't necessarily coincide with the profit motive of business.

This autumn, the European parliament will reflect on the council's position and make its decision. The hope now - for national governments, our environment and the people of Europe - is that the parliament sticks to its position on GMO legislation, and challenges the council's proposals.

In July 2011, the European parliament agreed a position in favour of strong national-level GMO bans. We urge parliamentarians to uphold this. They should support solid legal grounds for prohibiting GM crops, based on supplementary scientific environmental checks and socio-economic considerations.

We urge the parliament to remove from the legislation any role for biotech companies in government decisions about the cultivation of GM crops. Then we would really have something to celebrate.

About the author

Mute Schimpf is food campaigner for Friends of the Earth Europe

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