

EU needs stronger food safety authority

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Opinion

Parliament has prevailed against lobbyists in the battle against GMOs, but Europe is still struggling to effectively protect its citizens' health, argues Marc Tarabella.



A four year legislative battle has finally come to an end. The European parliament has won its case. Member states now have the ability to decide for themselves whether or not they want to allow crops of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) on their soil.

In the end, pro-GMO lobbies, led by several multinationals and Great Britain, did not get their way.

In addition, we were able to obtain a legal basis allowing member states to ban the implementation of GMO crops and an extension of the list of motives for this. We also demanded restrictive measures for coexistence - in other words, the goal is to avoid contamination of traditional crops by GMO crops.

Currently, the real problem is that citizens have no way of having a clear idea of what exactly the consequences of consuming GMOs are. A recent Eurostat study showed that 59 per cent of Europeans think GMOs are dangerous.

For every study slating GMOs, a counter-study pops up saying the exact opposite. We are faced with a constant clash between pro- and anti-GMO advocates, and this is no way benefits consumers. Therefore, it's up to Europe to take matters into its own hands, especially the commission, through the European food safety authority (EFSA).

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But is EFSA really qualified to handle the issue of GMOs? Its track record is somewhat worrying. Several former members of food-processing industry lobbies - including their president, who has since resigned - have been nominated as EFSA officials.

Between 1998 and 2010, out of the 125 import authorisation requests submitted to the commission, other than six applications that were withdrawn by manufacturers themselves, none were denied.

EFSA also allowed Bisphenol A, which is found in baby bottles, before several member states banned it and the commission itself backtracked on its agency's decision.

Furthermore, the authority kept mum through the deadly E. coli crisis.

This organisation is responsible for the food safety of half a billion citizens - it is perfectly within our rights to expect it to be neutral, upright and trustworthy. However, for this to happen, the agency needs the means to succeed, and this includes reviewing its ridiculously small budget so that it can carry out its duty properly.

We recently called for stricter risk evaluation methods used by EFSA and for enhanced transparency in the banning process. Meanwhile, multinationals have argued that we must not hold up science.

I am in favour of the principle of precaution. As MEP in charge of consumer safety, I cannot let citizens consume foods whose consequences on health in the medium term are still unknown.

Studies on GMOs have been left in the hands of multinationals for too long. These companies are merely motivated by greed and the promotion of single-crop farming, with a complete disregard for food safety and biodiversity. We need public and neutral research on the topic.

About the author

Marc Tarabella is a member of parliament's agriculture and rural development committee

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