

GM-free Ireland Network

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NEWS RELEASE

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IRISH GMO POTATO EXPERIMENT CANCELLED

**Co. Council declares Meath a GMO-free zone
BASF forced to cancel GMO experiment
Press conference at European Commission Office 10am Wednesday**

Meath County Council last night unanimously passed two motions that are widely expected to force the world's largest chemicals company BASF to abandon a controversial experiment with patented genetically modified (GMO) potatoes which it hoped to launch in the area this week.

In January, the German company BASF Plant Science GmbH notified Ireland's Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) of its plans to start a five-year experiment with 450,000 genetically modified potatoes on a farm near Summerhill, Co. Meath. Following a public consultation process and a series of probing questions by EPA staff, the regulatory body approved the GMO experiment last Friday subject to BASF agreeing to 10 conditions, including a mandatory 4 year post-release monitoring period for environmental health risks.

At an emergency community meeting in Navan on Friday night, the EPA's provisional go-ahead was criticized as a highly controversial and premature decision that ignored the health and environmental risks warnings of independent GM scientific experts, made in the face of total opposition from stakeholders across the country. Local farmers said the release of patented GMO crops could expose them to cross-contamination, mandatory GM labeling, loss of market share, demands for patent royalties, patent infringement lawsuits, and possible loss of ownership of their crops if they became infected with the patented GMO genes. Jim Cosgrave, a farmer from Enfield, said the locals were also extremely concerned about the impact on property values. "Who would want to buy or rent contaminated farmland?" he said. An Irish Times news poll yesterday found that 72 per cent of respondents oppose GM crop trials in Ireland.

The Council's first motion declares Meath a GMO-free zone. This makes Meath the sixth county on the island to prohibit GMO seeds and crops, along with Cavan, Clare, Fermanagh, Monaghan and Roscommon, and the towns of Galway, Navan, Newry and Clonakilty. Meath benefits from some of the most fertile soils in Ireland and is home to the country's largest potato growers. Its official GMO-free status has symbolic importance because Co. Meath (from the Gaelic word "Midhe" which means "centre") was the ancient royal county of Ireland during the Neolithic and Celtic periods and the seat of the country's High Kings at the Hill of Tara.

The Council's second motion calls on the EPA to not allow the experimental growing of any GMO seeds or crops in Ireland.

Both motions were tabled by Green Party Councillor Tom Kelly. Councillors said that the EPA's decision would produce experimental transgenic potatoes that could not be placed on the market either as animal feed or food, and that the EPA and BASF failed to apply for the planning permission that is consequently required by law for re-zoning the farmland from agricultural to development use. They also said the legal requirement imposed by the EPA for BASF to protect the site with a high-security electrical fence does not conform with normal agricultural practice under Section 5 of the Planning Act.

Frank Corcoran, Chairman of An Taisce – the National Trust for Ireland, said the Meath Co. Council decisions will trigger a lengthy legal procedure that will effectively prevent the release of GMO crops in Meath for the foreseeable future.

Common sense and local democracy

Irish whiskey and Guinness were flowing last night as farmers, food producers, chefs and consumers celebrated the decision as a victory for common sense and local democracy. Michael O'Callaghan, co-ordinator of the GM-free Ireland Network which lobbied the Meath Co. Council extensively in advance of the EPA decision, said he was thrilled the Local Authority has taken responsibility to protect the County from an irreversible invasion of GM crops for which there is no market in Europe.

GMO crops are banned or restricted by six EU governments, and thousands of local areas across Europe.

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Michael O'Callaghan said "Meath Co. Council has shown the wisdom of the subsidiarity principle, whereby political decisions on GM farming are best taken democratically at the local level by the farmers and citizens who will be affected by them, rather than by unaccountable bureaucrats in Dublin, the European Commission in Brussels, and the WTO in Geneva. My grandfather was a member of the first Dáil (Irish Government) which won independence and self-determination for the Irish people; he would be furious at our current government's policy to introduce patented GMO seeds and crops -- a new form of corporate biological colonialism that would be impossible to reverse".

Commenting from Berlin on Meath Co. Council's decision, Benedikt Haerlin, who organises the annual European GMO-free Regions conference, said the EC's policy to force member states and regions to accept contamination of agricultural seeds and crops by GMOs is fundamentally and legally flawed. "We welcome Co. Meath's initiative which is backed by 175 regions and 3,500 local authorities in 22 EU member states" he said.

Call for Ireland to conserve its GMO-free status

The GM-free Ireland Network will host a press conference at the European Commission Office in Dublin at 10 am tomorrow (Wednesday 10 May), kicking off a series of European Day debates in the Dáil, including a speech by EC Agriculture and Rural Development Commissioner Mariann Fischer-Boel.

Politicians at the press conference will call for the whole island of Ireland to be declared a GMO-free biosphere reserve for the food security of other EU member states, and demand EU legislation that recognises the democratic right of member states and regions to prohibit GMO seeds and crops if they choose to do so.

Confirmed speakers include Kathy Sinnott MEP (Independent), Marian Harkin MEP (Independent), Green Party leader Trevor Sargent TD, Mary Upton TD (Labour Party spokesperson on Agriculture and Food), Michael Mulcahy TD (Fianna Fáil - Government Convener on the Joint Oireachtas Committee on European Affairs and former Lord Mayor of Dublin), Eddie Punch (General Secretary of the Irish Cattle and Sheepfarmers Association), and Michael O'Callaghan of GM-free Ireland. Senator James Bannon (Fine Gael Spokesperson on Environment, Local Government and Heritage in the Upper House and General Secretary of the Local Authority Members Association) may also attend.

ENDS

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