

PRESS RELEASE

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IRISH MEPS MOVE TO PREVENT GMO INVASION

DUBLIN, 7 December 2006 – Irish MEPs Liam Aylward (FF), Kathy Sinnott (Independent) and Marian Harkin (Independent) have strongly criticised a controversial draft resolution on biotechnology and genetically modified crops to be voted on soon by the European Parliament.

The Resolution on Biotechnology: Prospects and Challenges for Agriculture in Europe (2006/2059 (INI) [1] is based on a paper written by a UK consulting firm [2] and is replete with biotech industry bias and misinformation [3].

The resolution seeks to downgrade the status of the Precautionary Principle in EU law, to discredit the scientific evidence that GM crops do not perform as expected, and to support giant agri-biotech corporations which want to seize control of European agricultural seeds through GMO crop patents [4]. Whoever controls the seeds controls the food [5]. According to EU and Irish patent law, farmers contaminated by GMOs no longer own their seeds and crops [6].

The draft resolution was submitted to the European Parliament by Kyosti Virrankoski MEP, from Finland, whose government repeatedly votes (with the Netherlands and Sweden) to legalise GM crops in Europe, while the other 22 EU member states often vote against or abstain.

The resolution must first be voted on by the EU Parliament Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development on 19 December. The two Irish MEPs on this committee are Liam Aylward and Mairead McGuinness. All MEPs will then vote on the final text on 31 January.

Liam Aylward MEP and the Polish MEP Bernard Wojciekowski called for the resolution to be withdrawn in its entirety.

Liam Aylward said: "I will vote against the adoption of the Virrankoski report in December and in the Plenary session in January 2007 because the introduction of GM technology will damage the reputation of Irish agriculture, with serious economic consequences for our farm, food and tourism sectors. Ireland should concentrate on organic and conventional agriculture, building on Ireland's reputation as a producer of fresh, good quality and healthy food products".

In a statement issued today on the draft resolution, Marian Harkin MEP said "I have particular problems with the multi-national companies which are progressively patenting agricultural seeds to exploit primary producers in Ireland and elsewhere. I find it particularly invidious that GMOs can cross contaminate other crops, leading to multi-national companies establishing rights they should not have."

Other MEPs have proposed 190 amendments [7] including 23 co-signed by Kathy Sinnott MEP (Independent) and submitted by MEPs Hiltrud Breyer (Germany), Jill Evans (UK), and Karin Scheele (Austria). These stipulate:

- that there is a lack of transparency and public involvement in the policy making process;
- that the European Commission's failure to present common measure for the "co-existence" of GMO crops shows that it is impossible to release them without environmental and health risks, and without affecting conventional and organic farming;
- that no GMO crops should be allowed if there is risk of contamination and loss of market share for contaminated farmers;
- that the regulation of biotechnology must be firmly grounded in the application of both the Precautionary Principle and the Polluter Pays principle, as stated in the EU Sustainable Development Strategy.
- that there needs to be a debate at EU level with all stakeholders on liability for damages incurred in the growing and use of biotechnological products: who is liable, what can be claimed and under

what circumstances a claim can be made; emphasises the importance of proportionality and fair play, stresses that farmers who deliver to certain markets and who want to maintain their production cannot bear the burden of losing their markets in case of contamination; stresses that liability must be based on the 'polluter pays' principle;

Kathy Sinnott emphasised that liability for GMO crop contamination must be based on the Polluter Pays principle, adding that "Irish farmers who want to continue delivering to the growing local and global GM-free food cannot bear the burden of the massive economic losses that will arise if they are contaminated. The whole of Ireland should be declared a GMO free zone."

Mairead McGuinness MEP submitted 22 more superficial amendments. While admitting that the draft text of the resolution is biased in favour of the agri-biotech corporations, she failed to call for the deletion of a clause intended to weaken liability laws. Last week she told Friends of the Earth Europe that "the anti GM lobby must be aware of reality" and that "bans on GMOs are too simplistic." [8].

But six European governments and 175 regional governments in 22 EU member states [9] have already implemented total or near-total bans on GMOs because of their legal, economic, health, environmental and food security risks [10]. Poland, the EU's largest agricultural producer, recently defied both WTO and EC laws with legislation that prohibits all GMO seeds and crops, giving the biotech industry a one-year deadline to prove that GM animal feed is safe before prohibiting its use as well.

There is now world-wide evidence that GMO seeds and crop inevitably contaminate seeds, crops and food [11], and there is no market for GM food in Europe and many other countries [12].

Liam Aylward MEP said "GM crops can NOT co-exist with conventional and organic crops. Cross pollination is inevitable through wind, animals and other wildlife. As Minister of State in the Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry from 2002-2004, this belief was strengthened through first hand experience of the GMO issue, the patenting of GM seeds, and the health and environmental impacts of GMOs including the destruction of biodiversity. I am against the introduction of GM crops into Ireland."

Ruth Hegarty, Secretary-General of Euro-Toques Ireland (the country's leading chefs organisation [13], said "any resolution from the European Parliament which so dramatically and incautiously favours GM technology has the potential to open the floodgates for its careless proliferation. We are totally opposed to GM food and farming because of concerns about consumer choice, possible environmental and health impacts, the reputation of our country and the possible affects on our food and tourism industry and our food exports, and questions of food diversity and food security. We do not believe that coexistence between GM and conventional/organic crops is possible, and there is ample evidence to back this up.

But the Minister for Agriculture and Food, Mary Coughlan, is about to publish a controversial strategic policy document intended "to ensure the co-existence" of GMO crops with conventional and organic farming here. Most of the stakeholders who participated in a related public consultation process say the policy completely ignores their views [14] and that the public participation process violates the Aarhus Convention on public participation in environmental decision-making [15] because it excluded most of the other key stakeholder groups, including food exporters, who will be materially affected by the policy. They say the Minister's strategy would irreversibly contaminate the Irish food chain with GM ingredients that are unwanted by the majority of consumers, food brands and food retailers in Europe.

Marian Harkin MEP said today that "Ireland should remain free of GM seeds and crops. We can not allow the European Commission to impose a requirement that we accept them against the wishes of the overwhelming majority of Ireland's citizens. Just as one cannot be a little bit pregnant, one cannot be a little bit GMO-free. Total exclusion of GMO seeds and crops is right for Ireland and we must oppose their introduction at all EU levels including in the European Parliament".

GM-free Ireland, which represents over a million citizens opposed to GM food and farming [16], has called on all Irish and Northern Irish MEPs to reject the EU biotech resolution. GMFI spokesperson Michael O'Callaghan said "the time has come for all our elected representatives to stand up for the legal right of the citizens of this island to remain free of GMO seeds and crops. Farmers are increasingly concerned about the economic losses related to GM contamination. This is an election issue which politicians will ignore at their peril."

He added "The WTO, the EC and the current Irish and UK governments claim we do not have the right to declare this island or any part of it as a GMO-free zone. These laws are unjust because they violate our fundamental democratic human right to choose safe GMO-free food, and also violate the Irish Constitution which holds our government accountable to protect the economic livelihood of Irish citizens including the farm, food and tourism sectors. The island of Ireland could have the most credible GMO-free food brand in Europe, and a clear competitive advantage for our food and farming future. Bertie Ahern sold us out by reversing Ireland's GMO-free policy in 1998. Has he got the balls to defend us now?" [17].

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NOTES TO EDITORS

1. The draft EU biotech resolution can be downloaded from [http://www.gmfreeireland.org/coexistence/EU/EP-2006-2059\(INI\).pdf](http://www.gmfreeireland.org/coexistence/EU/EP-2006-2059(INI).pdf)
2. The draft resolution is based on a paper commissioned by the European Parliament from the consulting firm ADAS UK (www.adas.co.uk), entitled "Biotech in the EU agriculture: perspectives and challenges, provisional version" IP/B/AGRI/IC/2006_057.

ADAS wrote the paper with input from Jeremy Sweet, a retired scientist and vice chair of the GMO Panel at the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA). The latter was publicly discredited in April 2006 when the European Commission agreed a proposal by EU Health and Consumer Protection Commissioner Markos Kyprianou and EU Environment Commissioner Stavros Dimas, to overhaul EFSA's authorisation procedures for placing GM products on EU markets. Kyprianou and Dimas criticised EFSA for routinely approving GM foods based on safety claims made by the agri-biotech companies they are supposed to regulate, for refusing to consider independent scientific evidence on GMO risks, and for ignoring the views of the majority of EU member states which are opposed to GM food and farming. Since then, EFSA has been legally required to take into account the opinions of member states, and to conduct independent research on the short- and long-term health and environmental risks of GM food and farming.

At the official EU stakeholders conference on the "co-existence" of GMO crops attended by 800 people to provide input into EU policy in Vienna in April 2006, Jeremy Sweet was accused of usurping his role as the designated rapporteur for a workshop on GMO segregation, because he used the available time to give his personal vies instead of reporting on the workshop proceedings.

3. The ADAS paper and the EC biotech resolution blatantly repeat standard agri-biotech industry hype, false claims and misinformation including disputed and unsourced data on the uptake of GMO crops published by the ISAAA (International Service for the Acquisition of Agri-Biotech Applications) which is funded by Bayer CropScience, Monsanto, Syngenta, Pioneer Hi-Bred and the BBSRC to promote GMO crops in the developing countries. See <http://www.gmwatch.org/profile1.asp?PrId=66>. See also the Friends of the Earth Europe report on Monsanto at http://www.foeeurope.org/publications/2006/who_benefits_from_gm_crops_Jan_2006.pdf). The quoted ISAAA figures give the impression that GMO crops have been widely adopted outside the EU, whereas in reality they have only been planted on 2.6% of the world's agricultural area.

4. In large areas of the USA, Canada, Argentina, Brazil and other countries, contamination from GMO seeds and crops is so widespread that it is no longer possible to grow GM-free food, resulting in massive economic losses for farmers and food exporters.

Canadian farmer Percy Schmeiser lost ownership of his crops after they were contaminated by Monsanto's patented GMO oilseed rape. For details, see transcript of his keynote address to the Green Ireland conference, June 2006 at <http://www.gmfreeireland.org/conference/trans/P.Schmeiser.pdf> .

Monsanto Canada has written thousands of "extortion letters" to contaminated farmers demanding hefty payments prior to deciding whether to sue them afterwards for patent infringement. Monsanto Canada also claims that farmers who open their bags of GM seeds thereby agree to not discuss contamination problems with the press, and offers material incentives to farmers who denounce contaminated neighbours, thus setting farmer against farmer, destroying traditional neighbourly relations and wrecking the social fabric of rural communities. For hard evidence of this, see:

Monsanto "extortion" letter:

<http://www.gmfreeireland.org/conference/trans/exhibits/MonExtortion.pdf> ;

Monsanto GM contract with onerous freedom of speech clauses:

<http://www.gmfreeireland.org/conference/trans/exhibits/MonContract.pdf> ;

Monsanto GM seed bag featuring phone number to call to denounce contaminated farmers:

<http://www.gmfreeireland.org/conference/trans/exhibits/Seedbag.pdf> .

5. See The Future of Food DVD, available from <http://www.thefutureoffood.com>. This is essential viewing for all politicians and journalists wishing to understand the historic nature of the attempt to take over the global food supply via GM crop patents.

6. Fergal Brady at the Irish Patent Office (<http://www.patentsoffice.ie>) informed GM-free Ireland that there is no provision in EU or Irish patent law to protect farmers contaminated by GMO crops from being sued for patent infringement and from thus ownership of their seeds and crops.

7. The proposed amendments of the EU biotech resolution can be downloaded from [http://www.gmfreeireland.org/coexistence/EU/EP-2006-2059\(INI\)Amendments.pdf](http://www.gmfreeireland.org/coexistence/EU/EP-2006-2059(INI)Amendments.pdf) .

8. Statement by Mairead McGuinness to Friends of the Earth Europe GM campaign co-ordinator, Helen Holder, November 2006.

9. For information of GMO crop bans in EU member states, see <http://www.gmofree-europe.org> .

10. Information on the risks of GMO food and farming:
crop risks: <http://www.gmfreeireland.org/crops> .
animal feed risks: <http://www.gmfreeireland.org/feed> .
health risks: <http://www.gmfreeireland.org/health> .
environmental risks: <http://www.gmfreeireland.org/environment> .
legal risks: <http://www.gmfreeireland.org/legal> .

11. For global register of GM contamination incidents, see <http://www.gmcontaminationregister.org> .

12. No Market for GM-labelled Food in Europe, published by Greenpeace, January 2005. This detailed report shows that the EU market for GM labelled food products is virtually closed. Europe's top 30 retailers and top 30 food & drink producers have policies and non-GM commitments which reveal a massive international food industry rejection of GM ingredients. This cuts across the industry from food and drink manufacturers to retailers, and includes everything from snacks and ready meals to pet food and beer. The combined total food and drink sales of the 49 companies with a stated non-GM policy in their main market or throughout the EU (27 retailers and 22 food and drink producers) amounts to € 646 billion, more than 60% of the total € 1,069 billion European food and drink sales. Irish food companies doing business internationally need to implement a non-GM policy without delay. The report can be downloaded as a 2.2 MB pdf file from <http://www.gmfreeireland.org/downloads/NoMarketForGMFood.pdf> .

13. Euro-Toques Ireland: <http://www.eurotoquesirl.org> .

14. See <http://www.gmfreeireland.org/coexistence/> .

15. The Århus Convention (officially known as the UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-Making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters) was adopted on 25 June 1998 in the Danish city of Aarhus (Århus) at the Fourth Ministerial Conference in the "Environment for Europe" process. It entered into force on 30 October 2001. (For details see <http://europa.eu.int/comm/environment/aarhus/> . For recent up-dates and the follow-up process see <http://www.unece.org/env/pp/welcome.html>).

The Århus Convention establishes a number of rights of the public (citizens and their associations) with regard to the environment. Public authorities (at national, regional or local level) are to contribute to allowing these rights to become effective. The Convention provides for:

- the right of everyone to receive environmental information that is held by public authorities ("access to environmental information"). This can include information on the state of the environment, but also on policies or measures taken, or on the state of human health and safety where this can be affected by the state of the environment. Citizens are entitled to obtain this information within one month of the request and without having to say why they require it. In addition, public authorities are obliged, under the Convention, to actively disseminate environmental information in their possession;
- the right to participate from an early stage in environmental decision-making. Arrangements are to be made by public authorities to enable citizens and environmental organisations to comment on, for example, proposals for projects affecting the environment, or plans and programmes relating to the environment, these comments to be taken into due account in decision-making, and information to be provided on the final decisions and the reasons for it ("public participation in environmental decision-making");

- the right to challenge, in a court of law, public decisions that have been made without respecting the two aforementioned rights or environmental law in general ("access to justice").

The Aarhus convention has been signed by all EU member states, but has yet to be ratified by Ireland.

16. The GM-free Ireland Network is an association of individuals and organisations collaborating to keep the whole island of Ireland free of GM food and farming. It has the largest number and the broadest diversity of stakeholder groups of any NGO on this island. Its 126 organisational members (and the populations of the 9 Irish counties and 9 city or town councils which oppose the cultivation of GM crops) now represent over 1 million citizens. The GM-free Ireland campaign is endorsed by MEPs, TDs, Senators and MPs from all the political parties. For details see <http://www.gmfreeireland.org> .

17. In its 1997 pre-election campaign pledge, Bertie Ahern's Fianna Fáil party promised never to allow GM crops in Ireland, but reversed this policy after a visit to the US White House on St. Patrick's Day 1998. The current Irish government has since played a major role in legalising them in Europe. For details see

<http://www.gmfreeireland.org/resources/documents/IRL/politics/FF/lies.php>