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1,000 GMO-FREE ZONES DECLARED IN IRELAND ON EARTH DAY 2005

GM-Free Ireland Network, 22 April 2005 -- Dublin, Ireland.

One thousand GMO-Free Zones were declared throughout the island of Ireland today -- 22nd April, Earth Day 2005 -- by farmers, food producers, hotels, restaurants, markets, pubs, retailers, and homes North and South of the border. These sites require legal protection from contamination by genetically modified (GM) seeds, crops, trees, livestock and fish. Hundreds of participants have placed GMO-FREE ZONE signs outside their place of business.

The event was co-ordinated by the GM-free Ireland Network (1), an association of 56 farming organisations, companies and environmental groups representing 32,000 farmers, foresters, food producers, food distributors and exporters, leading chefs and restaurants, NGOs, professional associations, doctors, economists, lawyers, journalists, students, and consumers.

Speakers included Kathy Sinnott MEP, John Heney (Irish Cattle and Sheep Farmers Association), Michael O'Callaghan (GM-free Ireland), Brian Meaney (Clare County Council), and Sean McArdle (Irish Farmers Markets).

The GM-Free Ireland Network launched this initiative with a briefing for media and politicians to highlight the legal, economic, health, environmental and food security benefits of keeping Ireland free of GM crops, and a political strategy to achieve this goal. The briefing, which took place in Buswell's Hotel in Dublin included a digital map showing the location of the GMO-free sites (2).

Co. Clare, Co. Fermanagh and Co. Monaghan have already passed GM-free motions. City Councils and other Local Authorities which have done likewise include Clonakilty, Derry, Mourne, Navan and Newry. GM-free motions have also been tabled in Co. Leitrim, Dublin City Council and South Dublin County Council.

Addressing the briefing today the coordinator of the GM-free Ireland Network, Michael O'Callaghan, said "This government has never voted against GM crops in the EU parliament. It still promotes the transnational agri-biotech companies' unscientific claims that genetically modified food and crops will increase crop yields, improve nutrition, and alleviate world hunger. But independent scientific evidence from around the world proves beyond doubt that GMO crops often fail to perform, inevitably contaminate surrounding regions, produce superweeds, can never be recalled, and cannot "co-exist" with conventional and organic farming (3). If the Irish Government and its Northern Ireland counterpart go ahead with their current strategy to allow the so-called "co-existence" of GMO crops on this island, we will lose our right to choose safe GM-free farming and food, forever."

Michael O' Callaghan continued, "The introduction of patented GMO crops in Ireland would cause all farmers to be contaminated, lose their right to save and plant their own seeds, and burden them with annual licensing fees, higher production costs, superweeds, bureaucracy, labelling, traceability, liability issues, and patent infringement lawsuits with no insurance available to cover the risks. GM animal feed is already causing Irish farmers to lose access to prime EU export markets, and destroying our world famous clean green reputation as 'Ireland the food island.'"

Kathy Sinnott, MEP said "GMO crops are an experiment. I have told the European Parliament that I do not support the GMO experiment but if it is to go ahead in Europe, I recommend Ireland as the perfect control. It is an island with predominantly westerly winds and therefore significantly protected from GMO contamination from neighbouring countries. With this control, the EU will be able to properly assess GM crops in 5, 10, 50 years time. And if GM bellies up European farmers and consumers will be able to get safe food and seed stocks from us in Ireland."

Michael O'Callaghan agreed: "Keeping Ireland GMO-free will provide Ireland with a significant competitive economic advantage. The vast majority of European food brands, retailers and consumers refuse GM food (4). Our Atlantic winds and island status provide the capacity to produce the most credible GM-free agricultural seeds and food in the EU." (5)

Also speaking at the briefing John Heney, who is the Rural Development Chairman of the Irish Cattle and Sheep Farmers Association, said "Research consistently shows that the majority of EU consumers are strongly opposed to the use of GM, whether in the production of food for human consumption or as part of the diet of animals destined for dairy and meat production. This is a vital message, which cannot be ignored if we wish to successfully market Irish beef. The old adage that 'the customer is always right' still pertains. As food producers we are aware of not alone our moral obligation but also our legal obligation to the people who consume our produce. We have yet to be reassured of the safety of GM food." He emphasized the need for farmers to think of their future: "Food scares such as BSE have already had devastating effects on farming. What if something should go wrong with GM food? Last week's Bt 10 maize scandal and the efforts of the people involved to fudge the situation makes me very nervous. We must ask ourselves, why should we risk our future for the benefit of faceless multinational companies? It makes absolutely no sense! Because of our unique island status we in Ireland have been afforded an opportunity to make a very important decision. We can either decided to remain a totally GM-free area and avoid all the inherent risks which this technology involves or we can go down the dangerous and untried GM road, a road which I am afraid has no turn backs!"

Although most EU governments still hesitate to ban GMO crops, 100 regional governments and 3,500 local authorities in 22 EU countries already prohibit GMO farming (5). But current EC law does not clearly define the matter: some national governments approve the regions' laws and others challenge them. The Assembly of European Regions, Friends of the Earth Europe and a wide coalition of NGOs have launched a campaign to ensure that an EC Directive due later this year on the "Co-existence" of GM crops with conventional and organic farming, will legally empower Irish Counties to protect themselves from GMO contamination. Irish County Councils are being invited to sign an EC petition to this effect. Michael O'Callaghan said "The declaration of 1,000 GMO-free zones in Ireland today marks a first step in protecting the right of Irish farmers and consumers to choose safe food and farming."

John Heney said he cannot understand the Irish Government's stance on GM. "The Government has an obligation to protect the interests of Irish citizens. Hiding behind the opinions of a small group of scientists is not good enough. We all know that science has got it wrong before and will do so again in the future. ICSA believes that the blindfolds must be removed; the public must be informed of all the issues involved and a national debate initiated on the use of GM in food. Simplistic and patronising statements are not good enough. For instance, just two weeks ago we heard one of our top scientist say on RTE Prime Time that 'sugar is sugar' the fact that it may be genetically modified was apparently irrelevant! I would say to this gentleman, try telling a person living in Belfast, Beirut or Baghdad that a car is a car - that is, irrespective of what somebody may have packed into its boot. This charade has gone on for far too long: our government must respect its citizen's rights and immediately get off the fence on the GM issue. They owe it to us all."

A public presentation about the GMO-free sites will also take place this afternoon as part of the Convergence Festival in Dublin.

ENDS

NOTES FOR EDITORS:

(1) The GM-free Ireland Network web site: <http://www.gmfreeireland.org>
Prominent organisational members include the Body Shop, An Taisce (the National Trust for Ireland), the Irish Doctors Environmental Association, the Irish Cattle and Sheep Farmers Association, the Irish Organic Farmers and Growers Association, the Restaurants Association of Ireland, Euro-Toques Ireland, the Irish Association of Health Stores, Irish Farmers Markets, the Irish Seed Savers Association, Friends of the Earth, Friends of the Irish Environment, the Columban Missionaries, the Food Writers Guild, Forest Friends Ireland, Just Forests, the Irish Peatland Conservation Council, the Irish Wildlife Trust, Voice of Irish Concern for the Environment, Slow Food Ireland, and Sustainable Ireland.

(2) The map of Irish GMO-free zones may be viewed at <http://www.gmfreeireland.org/map/index3.php>

(3) Authoritative information on the risks of GM food and farming is available from the Independent Science Panel on GM at <http://www.indsp.org>

(4) The EU market for GM labelled food products is virtually closed. According to the January 2005 Greenpeace report "No market for GM labelled food in Europe", 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 Greenpeace report can be downloaded from <http://www.gmfreeireland.org/downloads/NoMarketForGMFood.pdf> (2MB PDF file).

(5) Benedikt Haerlin, who chaired the European Conference on GMO-free Regions, Biodiversity and Rural Development in January 2005 said: "Ireland's particular situation – as an island that is better protected from unwanted gene transfer by wind-borne pollen than most European areas – makes it a perfect place to preserve the seeds heritage and the diversity of presently available commercial seeds, by staying GMO-free. The economic opportunities for Ireland are obviously in the non-GM sector. This presents a big opportunity, especially for international seed companies but also smaller and medium sized seed companies throughout the European Union. If Ireland were in a position to guarantee these companies that there is no threat of GMO pollution in your country, this would provide them with a great opportunity to use Ireland as a safe place for their seed reproduction. This would not only be an economic benefit, but could also be an advantage in terms of the further development of seeds and innovations and new jobs in research and development. The simple message from very many regions all across Europe is: please keep Ireland GMO-free!"

(6) Information and maps of all the GMO-free zones in Europe may be found at <http://www.gmofree-europe.org>.

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