



PRESS RELEASE

ENVIRONMENTAL MINISTERS CALLED UPON TO REJECT MANDATE TO EUROPEAN COMMISSION ON GMOs

(Brussels, 8th March). The European Environmental Bureau, the largest federation of environmental citizens organisations in Europe, has called upon EU Environmental Ministers to **refuse** a negotiation mandate to the Commission on GMOs and public participation.

This Thursday, the EU Environmental Council is to decide on how the EU will act in the final phase of negotiations on amending the Aarhus Convention so that it would include European citizens' rights to public participation in decision-making on GMOs. This would include decisions on deliberate releases of GMOs in agriculture, placing GMO products on the market, and contained use of GMOs. The Aarhus Convention gives citizens the right to access information, public participation in decision-making and access to justice in environmental matters 19 Member States and the European Community have already ratified this Convention and the six remaining Member States are in the process of doing so. However, the current Convention does not include the right to public participation in GMO matters. To remove this exemption, negotiations were launched in 2002.

John Hontelez, Secretary General of the EEB comments, *“The negotiation process has been very hard, as the EU Member States were divided and had decided they wanted to come to agreement amongst themselves before involving the other Parties of the Convention. As a result, 14 Parties that are outside the EU, most of them clearly demanding an international arrangement that they could use at home, were left in the cold.”*

According to the EEB, France and the Commission are the hardliners in current negotiations, fighting any Aarhus Convention interference with their internal and global GMO politics. Apparently, in the end, they have succeeded in convincing or at least accepting a majority of Member States. Sources say that only Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Greece and Italy are likely to oppose the Commission's mandate, too few members to block it.

In a letter to Ministers yesterday, the EEB asked some tough questions: *“Whether you are in favour of the use of GMOs in agriculture or not, does not matter. The issue here is: are you supporting **double standards** in public participation? Do you want to protect producers and users of GMOs from public scrutiny while you allow such scrutiny when it comes to building highways, waste treatment plants, mines etc? Do you want to withhold from your colleagues in the countries east of the EU the help they very much need to establish solid public participation procedures regarding GMOs in their countries? Do you agree with the Commission that environmental democracy should be sacrificed for commercial and trade interests? If your answers are “no” to these questions, there is just one choice to make this Thursday: to reject the mandate of the Commission as is formulated now.”*

The EEB maintains that the proposed mandate is unacceptable in particular because:

- its first option is to prevent any change in the Convention, leaving GMOs out of the scope of the public participation and access to justice pillars;

- its fall back option is to leave an arrangement on public participation with the Cartagena Protocol, which is not at all the best place to discuss the kind of progressive arrangements that the Aarhus Convention Parties have agreed on for other types of environmentally related decisions;
- in any case it wants to prevent any link between public participation and the right of access to justice in the case of non-compliance with this right, effectively degrading the *right* to public participation to that of a *privilege*.

John Hontelez added: “*What are we to think of the government of Sweden, the cradle of open society, of the German government, with its Green Environment and Agriculture Ministers, or of the governments of countries such as Poland, Slovenia, Lithuania, Cyprus, Malta, Hungary, all known for being quite critical of GMOs. Do they all really want to be co-responsible for giving such preferential treatment to the introduction of GMOs to a wider Europe?*”

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Attached: letter to Ministers 07/03/05

Note : On 14th February 2005, the EEB addressed a letter to EU Environment Ministers voicing its concerns on specific issues relevant to the preparations for the Spring Council. These were : the focus of the Lisbon strategy,; climate change, preparations for the Stockholm convention on POPs, Aarhus convention preparations and progress on REACH

ENVIRONMENTAL MINISTERS MEETING IN EU COUNCIL MARCH 10

Brussels, 7 March 2005

Concerning: MANDATE EUROPEAN COMMISSION ON GMO's and Aarhus Convention

Dear Minister,

This Thursday you are asked to approve a mandate for the Commission to represent the EU in the final stages of negotiations on public participation in GMO related decisions in the framework of the Aarhus Convention.

THE EEB URGES YOU NOT TO AGREE WITH THE MANDATE THE COMMISSION IS ASKING

Whether you are in favour of the use of GMOs in agriculture or not, does not matter. The issue here is: are you supporting **double standards** in public participation? Do you want to protect producers and users of GMOs from public scrutiny while you allow such scrutiny when it comes to building highways, waste treatment plants, mines etc? Do you want to withhold your colleagues in the countries east of the EU the help they very much need to establish solid public participation procedures regarding GMOs in their countries? Do you agree with the Commission that environmental democracy should be sacrificed for commercial and trade interests?

If your answers are “no” to these questions, there is just one choice to make this Thursday: *to reject the mandate of the Commission as is formulated now.*

The mandate is unacceptable in particular because:

- its first option is to prevent any change of the Convention, leaving GMOs out of the scope of the public participation and access to justice pillars;
- its fall back option is to leave an arrangement on public participation with the Cartagena Protocol, which is not at all the best place to discuss the kind of progressive arrangements that the Aarhus Convention Parties have agreed on for other types of environmentally related decisions;
- in any case it wants to prevent that public participation is connected to the right for access to justice in the case of non-compliance with this right, degrading the *right* to public participation effectively to a *privilege*.

As other Parties of the Convention strongly disagree with the Commission’s position, and want the Aarhus Convention to include proper public participation rights on GMO decisions, by default the result will be the first option of the Commission.

The European public will not understand if the EU is promoting double standards, shielding GMO decisions from public participation, for the sake of GMO producers and users and under pressure from governments such as the USA.

Environmental Organisations as well as your colleagues in countries east of the EU are expecting you to refuse the Commission proposal and to work constructively towards the full inclusion of GMO related decision-making into the Aarhus Convention at the 2nd Meeting of Parties in Kazakhstan, this May. They need such an international agreement to ensure that public scrutiny can be organised in their countries as well.
Please prevent that the EU is seen in May as a pro-GMO force that finds environmental democracy less important!

In this matter, the EEB is working closely with environmental organisations in the larger Europe via the European Ecoforum. Throughout 2004, you have been receiving several letters of the EEB, together with Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth, who are following this issue very closely as well.

For more details about this issue and the EEB’s position, see the letter we sent you on the 14th February, highlighting our main concerns and suggestions for the upcoming Environmental Council.

Yours sincerely,

John Hontelez
Secretary General European Environmental Bureau
And
Chairman of the Public Participation Campaigns Committee of the European Ecoforum.