

Proposed amendments to the Virrankoski Resolution on Agriculture and Biotechnology

A6-0032/2007

Plenary discussion: 13/03/2007

Plenary vote: 14/03/2007

By theme, with justification:

1. The need for impact assessments for new applications of genetically modified crops

Amendments:

Point K: ADDITION

whereas the use of new technologies, for example in new crops for medicinal or other non-food purposes, offers new production opportunities, particularly in sectors where conventional production has ceased to be economically profitable, **whereas legally binding rules have to be adopted to ensure that existing farming practise, food security and the environment are guaranteed**

Point M: ADDITION

whereas bioenergy offers the possibility of increasing the share of renewable energy in overall EU energy consumption, which is a strategic goal of the Union, and some energy crops can present challenging opportunities, **providing that impacts on land use, food security and environmental impact are also taken into consideration**

POINT N: ADDITION

whereas the success of the production of second-generation biomass-based biofuels is conditional on support for biotechnological research **into processing, adapted engines, and on long term environmental impact assessment**

POINT 22: ADDITION

Calls on the Commission and Member States to support research on biotechnology applications offering clear social or environmental benefits, including the development of GM micro-organisms for water purification, land regeneration, the replacement of hazardous chemical substances currently in use and the development of sustainable and environmentally favourable energy sources (including biogas, hydrogen and second-generation biofuels); **and to include full and detailed socio economic and long term environmental impact assessments**

Justification

- Regarding GMOs there are two main applications that are of immediate relevance here: the use of GMOs in biofuels and in pharma crops (crops genetically modified to produce medicines)
- Biofuels raise a number of issues, whether they are genetically modified or not: a major increase in the production of biofuels will cause large changes to agriculture with possible negative effects on food security, rural livelihoods and biodiversity. Concerning GMOs, to date, there is no added value to use GMOs for biofuels – the world's largest biofuel producer, Brazil, uses conventionally grown sugar cane and corn varieties in the US that are promoted for biofuels have a higher starch level which is not a genetically modified trait. However, they are being promoted for biofuels as this provides producers (mainly in the US) with an outlet for crops that the public does not want to eat. If GMOs are grown in the EU for biofuels, the same issues concerning environmental impact and the risks of contamination of food and non GM farming will still apply.
- Concerning second generation biofuels, a thorough environmental impact assessment would be needed: the Commission is currently looking at using straw and wood but crop wastes could also be used. These are often ploughed back into the soil as a key to improving the organic content of the soil. In addition cop wastes are left in the fields over winter, becoming valuable sources of food for

wildlife such as birds and reducing soil erosion. Therefore the effects of using some agricultural “wastes” could be detrimental to soil quality and wildlife.

- The use of genetically modified enzymes are governed by EU laws to prevent them from escaping into the open environment. If there were to be a massive increase in the use of GM enzymes then it would seem prudent to revisit current laws and practises to ensure that controls are sufficient to keep the enzymes “contained” to any processing plant

2. Safeguarding the precautionary principle and EU biosafety legislation

Amendments:

- L. whereas GM products for use in agriculture necessarily have to pass very stringent assessments, ~~the present authorisation process is slow and bureaucratic, contributing to the EU lagging behind its global competitors~~
- 12.. Is aware of the existing as well as the potential impact of biotechnology on the competitiveness of plant breeding, farming and food production, in particular in view of the very different rates of uptake of the technology in Europe, ~~in comparison with its main competitors on the international agricultural markets,~~ and calls on the Commission to pay specific attention to this impact in its forthcoming studies, to inform the European Parliament in detail on this matter and to put forward specific legislative proposals if and where required;
14. Stresses the decisive importance of protecting human health and the environment in the approval process and underlines the use of objective scientific criteria in this respect; ~~points out that the precautionary principle cannot be used as an excuse to delay the process;~~
25. ~~Fears that the existing complex and extensive implementation of the Community legislation on biotechnological trials and the lengthy approval procedure for placing inventions on the market are creating real obstacles to European research and may lead to research activities and human resources being moved outside the EU;~~
26. ~~Underlines that the EU needs to support research in different fields~~ in order to avoid a strong concentration of research, inventions and immaterial rights among a few large global players, thus increasing their influence and power to the detriment of smaller companies and making countries and people more dependent on them;

Justification

- The Precautionary Principle is enshrined within EU law and must be respected.
- EU biosafety legislation (in this context Directive 2001/18 and Regulations 1829/2003 and 1830/2003 and the novel food law) is a model for the rest of the world, in particular developing countries that look to the EU for support for strict biosafety regulations when faced with pressure from the WTO and other global players.
- The WTO GMO dispute ruling found no clear winners or losers. The rights of countries to ban individual GMOs and the right for countries’ to have strict biosafety laws WAS NOT questioned. The only point that the EU was found at fault was “undue delay”.
- The time taken to authorise GMOs in the EU is down to various factors, including poor quality data from the company, and the consequent need for additional information, and inadequate risk assessments by the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA). The EFSA was publicly criticised by Environment Ministers at the Environment Council in March 2006 and then by the College of Commissioner in April 2006. A reform of the authority’s work is currently underway.
- Re point 26: Research should not be stopped. However, it should be made clear that it is not biosafety legislation that is stopping research. Consolidation and the risks that this can have on innovation are due to a small number, six, corporations that are behind the global seed market and GM crops. The degress and rapidity of market concentration as these corporations have bought other companies and merged has had an impact on market diversity. This is apparent in the US and not only the EU.

3. Public opinion

Amendments:

3. Stresses therefore that more agricultural funds must be allocated from the CAP to the biotechnology sector, including funds for the education of farmers about the possibilities of biotechnology within the framework of sustainable agriculture;
38. Notes that over 50% of citizens believe that biotechnology will improve their quality of life (Eurobarometer survey 2005) but that the public is still mostly sceptical about agricultural (green) biotechnology, and will continue to be so unless new crops and products are seen to have consumer benefits;

Justification

Public opinion must be respected. The majority of European citizens have not wanted to eat GM food for the last ten years and as the last Eurobarometer shows (2005, quoted in the resolution) this continues to be the case. It is important to listen and respond to these views, not to belittle public opinion. Even if many people do not have knowledge of biochemistry, they have clear opinions on the corporate control of their food.

European Institutions need to show that they are responsive to this.

It should be noted that the first public outrage came when Monsanto started a publicity campaign on "Biotechnology – it will feed the world" followed by report that the corporation had developed seed sterility "Terminator". The public simply did not want what was being offered and they have the right to this opinion.

Secondly, given public opinion, given that there is almost no market for GMOs in the European Union, is it really wise to spend even more taxpayers money (through the CAP) on GMOs? Biotechnology in food and agriculture is already a priority theme under FP7 (worth 50 billion euro overall) and the Commission funded Plants for the Future Technology Platform is calling for 45 billion euro to be spent on agricultural biotech by 2015. The CAP's pillar 2, agreed during the 2003 reform, is underfunded. This instrument is in place to support agri environment schemes and rural development and should be encouraged, especially as sectors that fall under agri environmental measures such as organic farming, are showing double digit growth in the EU and benefit from public support and demand. (demand actually outstrips supply in the EU)

4. Addressing the root cause of global poverty and hunger

Amendments:

35. Considers that some types of biotechnology may have a role to play in finding genuine solutions to global challenges such as a constantly increasing need for food, environmental problems, sustainable development and energy sufficiency, which are urgently needed; emphasizes the importance of biotechnology for the future of sustainable agriculture, for example in developing bio-energy, substitutes for oil products such as plastics and new sustainable methods for growing crops; considers that this should include helping developing countries in need to achieve the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals;

Emphasizes the importance of sustainable agriculture for example in renewable energy, new materials, and environmentally friendly crops, which should contribute to Developing countries achieving the Millennium Development Goals

Justification

- The problems of hunger and poverty are complex and need to be recognized as such. The "green revolution" has not brought the changes that proponents of mass production and intensive farming promised. There is not one solution for these issues and biotechnology must not be presented as a "silver bullet", especially when one considers how the main proponents of GMOs as a way of "feeding the world" are Northern based companies that stand to gain if GMOs are grown throughout the globe. The benefit to small scale farmers and rural communities is not immediately apparent, especially when one considers Intellectual Property Rights and the patenting of life.
- Nuances to the text are therefore needed: some types of biotechnology (marker assisted selection for example) could contribute to better selection of varieties, but problems of low market prices for

agricultural commodities, food distribution, conflicts etc will not be solved by one technology, particularly when developed in the context of the above bullet point.

5. Impacts of GMOs and the right to GMO free food and farming

Amendments:

- E. whereas developments in biotechnologies, provided these meet a need in the general interest, have the potential to yield many benefits for agriculture, such as increased yields, better product quality, reduced use of chemical fertilisers, herbicides, pesticides and fossil fuels and reduced soil erosion and pollution, but that more data on environmental impact and agronomic benefits are still needed
6. Notes that the EU is a major importer of GM soya in particular; and that Member States which do not grow GM crops use imported GM feed ingredients; notes also that alternatives to soya do exist and should be researched further
15. Calls on the Commission to put forward a proposal establishing workable and proportionate labelling thresholds for the adventitious presence of EU approved GM seeds in non-GM seeds;

Justification

- The impacts of GMOs are not clear: existing GMOs are not modified to increase yield and the US Department of Agriculture just last year confirmed that existing GMOs DO NOT show increased yield and may in some cases actually show a small decrease; Better product quality: no GMOs that improve product quality are on the market the only GMO that is in the pipeline for this is an improved animal feed so not for human malnourishment or public health; the use of pesticides and insecticides is still being debated – an extensive study in the US has shown considerable pesticide use increase since the introduction of GM crops; reduced soil erosion is linked to “low till” agriculture but this is not a specificity of GM farming but exists also for conventional farming. Low till is also an argument for reduced fossil fuel use and may well be true but as mentioned previously this is not a specificity of GM farming. Therefore before making sweeping statements on benefits, the facts and impacts need to be looked at closely. Many of the figures on biotech worldwide are from the ISAAA / Clive James, and industry funded association for the development of biotechnology so there is indeed quite some misinformation around.
- The issues facing soya production, monoculture and food insecurity of rural populations in South America because of the European meat markets is a problem for development, environmental sustainability and social justice. This should be recognised, in particular with regards to the possibility of alternatives and hence a reduction in the EU’s dependence on soya exports.
- There is nothing wrong with having seed legislation. However the problem is that Commissioner Dimas (environment) is isolated without even the support of his own staff on this: he favours a proposal for low thresholds whilst the pro-GMO Commission want high thresholds. This is a KEY issue because seeds as the building blocks of life, and given the irreversible nature of genetic contamination, must be safeguarded if any type of GM free farming is to be allowed.