

JOINT PRESS RELEASE

GM FREE LEITRIM
LEITRIM FARMERS COOP
THE ORGANIC CENTRE ROSSINVER
CLEAN (CAVAN LEITRIM ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS NETWORK)

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GM POTATO PROTEST, DUBLIN ON 22/02/06

27/02/06

Almost 40 farmers, growers and consumers from Leitrim took part in the protest before Leinster House last Wednesday against GMOS in Irish Agriculture, and against the GM potato release planned by the German company BASF in County Meath. The protest was organised by GM-Free Ireland Network.

A press conference was held before the protest. Speakers were amongst others John Brennan, manager of Leitrim Farmers Coop, and Marian Harkin, MEP for the Border Region, TD for Sligo-Leitrim.

John Brennan told the audience: "I'm really here to talk on behalf of consumers. And I have met no consumer yet who has shown any desire or interest to eat food that is de-natured or in some way plagiarized, vandalized, or distorted. Because at the end of the day we're here because we are all concerned about our own health, our children's health. Trying to develop a small organic cooperative in Western Ireland is difficult any day of the week. This is an insurmountable obstacle: if we end up with a situation where we have contamination of crops, and especially in our case contamination of animal feeds — and right now we are looking at significant contamination of animal feeds on the basis that GM maize is included in so many feed rations here — we have no chance of producing good quality wholesome organic produce for markets at home and abroad. So I urge you all as consumers: reject this hideous product and try and keep the island GM-free for all our sakes!" he told the audience.

Eddie Punch, General Secretary of the Irish Cattle and Sheepfarmers Association (ICSA), said "that the Irish Cattle and Sheepfarmers Association is against GM because we believe that our natural clean green food island image must be protected. If we go down the GM route, we are compromising irrevocably our ability to sell to premium European markets, to the maximum amount of consumers."

"We have deep concerns about the patenting of the means of producing food. This is something which I believe is a step in the wrong direction. What we need is food production to be in the hands of many different family farms in order to ensure our food security and food diversity" he added.

Dr. Elisabeth Cullen, Co-founder of Irish Doctors Environmental Association (IDEA), explained that her organisation has serious concerns about the health effects of

genetically engineered foods. “There have been no published papers of possible health effects of GM foods [on humans], but animal trials have given serious, serious cause for concern. I have documented here the recent animal trials and they are very very worrying. The other point I want to make is that more and more research scientists all over the world, and institutions, are calling for more research to be done on the possible health effects of GM foods. If we allow GM foods to be sold and grown in Ireland, we are guilty of betraying the interests of future generations. And the Irish Doctors Environmental Association will do all in its power to stop this trial” she said.

Seán McDonagh, SCC, Columban missionary priest and author, said “Patenting life is a moral issue, and the Precautionary Principle must be used. Because we don’t need it. No-one is asking for this except the GM companies. I think it’s evil.”

Also speaking at the conference were Senator David Norris, Independent and Trevor Sargent, Green Party.

Trevor Sargent said he has spoken to many farmers in County Meath and “they see this as nothing more than BASF coming to Ireland, effectively prostituting Ireland by using the name of Ireland to do their trial and then sell their global product with no benefit for Ireland, no benefit for Irish farmers, no benefit for Irish consumers.”

“This is a slippery slope” he continued. “If we allow it to happen now we’ll create the precedent for the future. And that means that we have to challenge the Government. The Minister for Agriculture in the Dáil told me that there were adequate safeguards, that it was watertight; that nothing could happen that would do any harm to anybody. And I have to challenge the Minister, and we all should challenge the Minister and the Government to say they do not have watertight regulations.”

“The only buffer zone that will be of any use in this country is the Irish Sea, and that should be the one we insist on!” he finished.

“Then there is the question of blight-resistant potatoes” Senator David Norris said. Blight-resistant potatoes can be produced, albeit sometimes in a slightly slower way, by traditional methods of breeding. Let’s not go in the fast lane: we know from our road accident rate in this country that the fast lane can be bloody dangerous.”

Frank Corcoran, Vice-President, European Environmental Bureau (EEB), explained that the EEB is “an umbrella organisation for 120 environmental Non Governmental Organisations across Europe, which represents 120 million people. And for each Presidency of the European Union – currently we have the Austrian – they produce this document which is the Ten Green Tests, a memorandum to the Presidency of the particular Council of Ministers at that time. And in that we’ve asked the Council of Ministers to work towards allowing the Member States the right to set up GMO-free zones at local and regional level.”

“It is perceived at the moment that things are going on behind closed doors, and this worries people. They say, why do things have to happen behind closed doors? In such a matter, it should be out in the open.”

“There is not in place yet across the European Union a fail-safe procedure to allow these things to be released into the atmosphere” he added.

Kathryn Marsh, Organic Trust member and member of the EPA's GMO Advisory Committee, said: "There is a complete democratic deficit in the treatment of GMOs in Ireland. There is only one route for ordinary Irish people to get their voices heard. And only four of us — four individuals in Ireland — have had a chance to use that route. They are Father Seán McDonagh, myself, David Jeffries, and Eanna Ní Lamhna, as representatives of stakeholder organisations on the EPA. Everybody else, on every committee that rules on GMOs in this country, has an interest in furthering biotechnology and GMOs. They are all either university scientists with their research funded by the biotechnology companies, or they are actually employees of biotechnology companies themselves. This is something to be borne in mind when we see that the Food Safety Authority says it's OK, the Bioethics Committee of the Royal Irish Academy says it's OK, the Inter-Departmental Committee on GMOs says it's OK. All of those are advised entirely or almost entirely (there are some exceptions on the Bioethics Committee where the medical profession is also involved), they are all advised by those with a financial stake in the biotechnology industry."

"70% of people in Europe don't want to eat GMOs" she continued. And as we've already heard, [animal] feed in Ireland, as John said, is heavily contaminated with GMOs. If a farmer buys a sack of feed it has by law to carry a label saying whether it has GMOs in it. And every single one of them, other than organic feed, carries that label. It says there are GMOs in this feed. There is no requirement that if you buy meat, if you buy milk, if you buy poultry, if you buy eggs, if you buy cheese, it doesn't have to say on that whether GMOs were used in producing it."

"People want their children and their grand-children to eat safely. Not just for themselves, they want it safe for future generations. At the moment, not only are they being denied that safety, they are being denied the right to find out whether it's safe."

Also speaking at the press conference was Marian Harkin, MEP for the Border Region, TD for Sligo-Leitrim. "When I heard the press conference and the march was on today I did fly in from Brussels this morning because I think it's very important that I'm here, that we are all here to air this issue, and you're right, Ireland's record in Europe is a disgrace on GMOs. We have either abstained or we have voted for."

And as Frank mentioned, at least the Austrian presidency is going in the direction of anti-GMO. They are organizing a conference later this year. And certainly, I hope that that will raise people's awareness. But the problem is: is it going to be too late for Ireland? Because what are we talking about here? Potatoes that we don't need, that we don't want, and that we risk our future status of remaining GMO-free. There are varieties out there that are blight-resistant. We don't need this, we don't want this. BASF wants this. This country doesn't need it and doesn't want it. And that's why I came here this morning. And to me as well, what we're looking at here is the ugly face of globalisation. Patenting life forms should, in itself, be resisted apart from what we're talking about here today."

"You mentioned the democratic deficit and it was mentioned by somebody else" she continued. "We have members of the Seanad, we have members of the Dáil here, and we have no influence on what happens here. I may have some influence on the European Parliament, on our vote in the European Parliament, but we have no influence on any of this. So there is a democratic deficit because most Irish people do not want GMO foods. And I will just finish by saying: it's not just this generation. We have a duty to the next generation to make sure that we don't do anything that will

impact negatively on their future. And I believe if this decision is taken to grant the license by the EPA, that's exactly what we'll be doing."

Irish people can make their voices heard by signing a petition on www.gmfreeireland.org, and also by printing it out, collecting signatures and sending them to the GM-free Ireland Network before the Environment Ministers' meeting in Austria, which is taking place on 9th of March, or by writing to Minister Roche.

Minister Coughlan has extended the time for submissions on the Report on Coexistence of GM and non-GM crops until 31st of March. Submissions have to be addressed to

Mr John Downey
Crop Production and Safety Division
Department of Agriculture and Food
Maynooth
Co. Kildare

john.downey@agriculture.gov.ie

The report is available to download at:

http://www.agriculture.gov.ie/index.jsp?file=publicat/publications2005/gm_coexistence/index.xml

No fee has to be paid with a submission.

The amount of regulations introduced by the Nitrates Directive are nothing in comparison with the amount and seriousness of the measures and regulations necessary if GM crops are introduced into Ireland, and recommended in this report. They must concern all farmers and growers who would have to take the burden of them first. All farmers organisations therefore have the responsibility to inform their members properly and to protect them now.

GM crops, once introduced, will, especially in a small country like this, take over and contaminate conventional and organic food, feed and horticultural crops. They can never be eradicated again.

NOTES:

A transcript of the press conference is available at

<http://www.gmfreeireland.org/potato/GMFIpc22Feb2006.pdf>