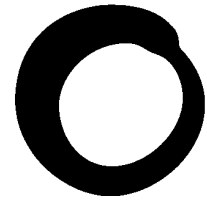


Briefing



**Friends of
the Earth**

Creeping Contamination

GM foods and consumer choice

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Real Food, March 2002

Introduction

The European Commission has proposed new legislation to trace and label GM foods. Whilst this is to be welcomed, serious lobbying by the biotech industry and the US Government may seriously weaken the proposals. In addition, the proposed legislation will still allow a level of contamination of our food with GMOs, some of which have not even been approved in Europe. This briefing summarises the new proposals and shows how you can help to counter this major lobbying offensive by industry and ensure that consumer choice is protected.

What's happening?

In July 2001, the European Commission tabled two proposals for new EU Regulations - one on the traceability & labelling of GMOs and one for the labelling of GM foods and animal feeds. These two laws are necessary to provide better traceability of GMOs at all stages of production so that foods can be labelled if they have been derived from GM crops.

The Environment, Public Health and Consumer Policy Committee of the European Parliament are currently examining the two proposals. This Committee will be making amendments to the proposals and is expected to vote on them at the beginning of June. All the members of the European Parliament will vote on the Committee's recommendations in July this year.

The Proposals

Traceability and labelling

The two proposals are passing through the European Parliament simultaneously. The *Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council concerning the traceability and labelling of genetically modified organisms and traceability of food and feed products produced from genetically modified organisms (COM(2001) 182)* is to ensure traceability of GMOs from operator to operator; to facilitate the labelling of GMOs; and to put a system in place to enable the withdrawal of GMOs from the market should any problems occur.

On the positive side:

- the proposal should ensure that the GMOs can be identified and labelled throughout the food and feed chain
- the proposal will facilitate the monitoring of health and environment effects of GMOs and the withdrawal of any harmful products.

On the negative side:

- the proposal does not include traceability of animal products such as meat, milk and eggs from animals fed on GMOs
- exemptions from the proposal are made for the "adventitious" or "technically unavoidable" presence of GMOs. This includes GMOs that have not been approved in the EU and such contamination will be allowed up to a threshold of 1%.

GM novel food and feed

The second piece of legislation is the *GM Food/Feed Regulation (COM(2001) 425)* which will cover authorisation and labelling of GM foods/feeds and food/feed ingredients (currently covered under the Novel Food Regulation (Regulation (EC) 258/97). This proposal introduces for the first time in the EU authorisation procedures for GMOs used in animal feed - at present these are unregulated.

On the positive side:

- the loophole, which allows biotech companies to shortcut full safety assessment procedures on the basis of “substantial equivalence”, would be discontinued
- the proposal will introduce authorisation and labelling of GM animal feed
- the proposal will improve consumer choice through labelling - all GMO-derived foods will have to be labelled

On the negative side:

- animal products such as meat, milk and eggs from GM-fed animals would not be subject to labelling
- exemptions from the proposal are made for the “adventitious” or “technically unavoidable” presence of GMOs. This includes GMOs that have not been approved in the EU and such contamination will be allowed up to a threshold level of 1%

Contamination legalised?

Friends of the Earth is extremely concerned over the exemptions made for “adventitious” or “technically unavoidable” presence of unauthorised GMOs. These GMOs would not be subject to approval, traceability or labelling. It would mean that 1 in 100 tomatoes, 10 out of 1000 salmon or 500 tonnes of a 50,000 tonne shipment of soya could be GM, yet exempt from the law. Consumers would face a lottery when for example, buying a tomato, as to whether it was GM or not. Consumer choice will not be guaranteed.

UK Government’s position

The UK Government does not support these proposals and is suggesting alternatives that will reduce consumer information over GM foods. Their position, which is supported by the US Government and the American Soybean Association, calls for no labelling of foods derived from GM crops where DNA or protein, for example soya oil which is found in many processed foods would not be labelled even though it came from GM soybeans. But consumers want to know how food is produced, which is the purpose of other traceability schemes that the UK Government supports such as those for beef, organic foods and even fairly-traded goods. In addition the UK and US are calling for a GM-free label. This may sound a good idea, but their proposal is aimed at speciality foods where the “cost involved should fall on those who wish to exercise that choice”(Letter from Sir John Krebs of the Food Standards Agency). In other words, you’ll only be able to choose GM free foods if you can afford it.

Act now!

It is vital to start lobbying the MEPs on the Environment Committee **NOW**. During April, MEPs in the Environment Committee will discuss and submit amendments to these two proposals followed by a vote in committee. After that the entire European Parliament will vote on which amendments to adopt and reject. This is a crucial opportunity to improve the proposed Regulations!

Please act now by writing to your MEP. Listed below are the UK MEPs on the Environment Committee (together with their party and constituency). These are the MEP's that will first look at the new proposals. It will then go to all MEPs so it is vital that you write to them as soon as possible. To find out your MEP, call 020 7227 4300; email eplondon@europarl.eu.int or go to the website www.europarl.org.uk You will have more than one MEP so please write to them all. It will be stronger if you write as an individual. The main points to raise are:

You want choice on whether to eat Gm foods or not.

The proposals are a welcome step especially on animal feeds and the use of substantial equivalence.

The main weakness is the permitted contamination of up to 1% which includes GM foods that haven't even been authorised yet.

Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Consumer Policy:

Members:

Caroline Jackson (Chair) (Conservative) South West
David Bowe (Labour) Yorkshire and the Humber
John Bowis (Conservative) London
Martin Callanan (Conservative) North East
Chris Davies (Lib Dem) North West
Robert Goodwill (Conservative) Yorkshire and the Humber
Catherine Stihler (Labour) Scotland
Philip Whitehead (Labour) East Midlands

Substitutes:

Philip Bushill-Matthews (Conservative) West Midlands
Jillian Evans (Green) Wales
Mary Honeyball (Labour) London
Eluned Morgan (Labour) Wales
Neil Parish (Conservative) South West

Conclusion

The public has made it very clear that they want the choice as to whether to eat GM foods. The food industry has responded and largely removed GM ingredients. However, the biotech industry strategy is becoming clear: Gradual creeping contamination will make sure we eat GM food whether we like it or not. They are taking away consumer choice. Don't let them - use this briefing and write to your MEP now!