



C. KINAPTON/SPL

EFSA scientific reports on both varieties concluded that neither would have “an adverse effect on human and animal health or the environment” in the contexts proposed. Both reports were ready by April 2005, and were updated in November 2006.

But it wasn't until last month that a draft decision was circulated inside the European Commission saying that neither crop should be approved for cultivation. It refers to 11 papers published since the EFSA's update that it says cast doubt on the crops' long-term environmental safety.

The publications include studies claiming that insecticidal molecules from the plant may persist in water or sediments draining from a cultivated field, and may disturb downstream ecosystems.

The environment commissioner did not ask the EFSA panel for an opinion on these additional papers. Garlich von Essen, secretary-general of the European Seed Association, says that this shows “disdain” for both the EFSA and its advisory system.

Marc Van Montagu, a plant geneticist and president of the European Federation of Biotechnology, says the commission has cherry-picked publications claiming possible dangers, and he questions the quality of the selected papers. Environment-commission officials respond that their risk-management process is supposed to reach beyond the EFSA's findings.

Once the commission's decision has been finalized, it will go to the Standing Committee on the Food Chain and Animal Health, which

comprises scientists and officials from member states.

The standing committee will vote on each proposal using a system — called the qualified majority vote — that reflects the size and population of each member state. If the voting is at odds with the commission's position, the dossiers are passed to the EU Environment Council of environment ministers of each member state, who must also vote on each case. But with populous nations such as Spain and the United Kingdom supporting approval, and Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic joining some of the original dissenters, neither side is likely to obtain the two-thirds majority needed to decide the issue. If that happens, under EU rules the final decision will be thrown back to the commission itself.

On 26 November, the German agriculture minister Horst Seehofer proposed that this tortuous approval process should be abandoned and a regulatory authority be created with full responsibility for analysing the science and drawing conclusions.

“The reservations of the public are not being sufficiently considered,” he said. “Until such an authority is created, there should be a moratorium on granting new approvals.”

Such reservations are exemplified by the continued resistance of some nations to cultivating MON810 maize, which is grown in only six EU countries. Austria actually banned the import of the maize in 1997, and has since resisted strong pressure to lift the ban, which is illegal under the 2001 directive.

In October, France's president Nicolas Sarkozy announced a suspension of the cultivation of transgenic maize until new national rules have been worked out. Sarkozy, who has recently laid out plans for far-reaching

environmental improvements in France, seems willing to risk a dispute with the commission (and the WTO) over the issue.

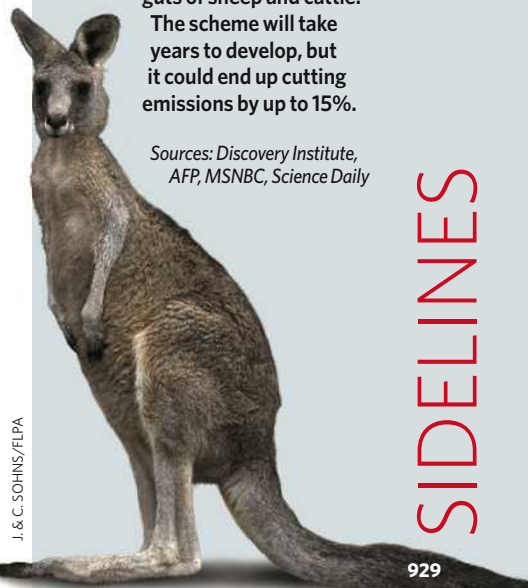
Meanwhile, the WTO is putting increasing pressure on the EU, giving it until 11 January to end national moratoriums. The commission says it expects to make its decision on the two maize varieties in January as well, although an exact date has not been set. “This is a real test case,” says Adrian Bebb, a Brussels-based campaigner for Friends of the Earth. “But we fear that Dimas's chances of winning are slim.”

See Editorial, page 921.



Environment commissioner Stavros Dimas plans to reject applications to cultivate two transgenic crops.

J. THYS/AFP/GETTY



J. & C. SOHNS/FLPA

ON THE RECORD

“I would have thought an intelligent person would have at least kept quiet until after tenure. Then you could advocate blowing up the Moon.”

Bruce Harmon, a physicist at Iowa State University, muses in a recently released e-mail about astronomer Guillermo Gonzalez, who promoted intelligent design while seeking tenure. Gonzalez was turned down in May and is now appealing against the decision on the grounds of discrimination.

SCORECARD



Coach potatoes

A year-long study finds that automated phone calls encouraging sedentary adults to exercise actually work.



Moon shots

Accusations that China faked photos from its Chang'e-1 Moon probe have proved to be false, but the investigation revealed flaws in the way the composite image was assembled, leaving the nation's space agency red-faced.

ZOO NEWS

Kangaroo flatulence

Kangaroos' farts are environmentally friendly. The marsupials' stomachs are home to bacteria that don't produce methane — a major greenhouse gas. This week Australian researchers unveiled a plan to transfer the green bugs into the guts of sheep and cattle.

The scheme will take years to develop, but it could end up cutting emissions by up to 15%.

Sources: Discovery Institute, AFP, MSNBC, Science Daily