

Europe and US in confrontation over GM food labelling criteria

[LONDON] The United States and the European Union are poised for a major confrontation over the regulation of genetic modification (GM) technology during international negotiations next week on the labelling of GM foods.

At a meeting of the United Nations food standards body, the Codex Alimentarius Commission, the European Union (EU) is expected to argue in support of a draft proposal that says all foods with a detectable GM ingredient should carry a mandatory label.

This proposal includes the labelling of GM foods whose composition, nutritional value and intended use are different from existing foods, even if a GM protein or DNA is no longer detectable in the finished product.

But the United States, along with Canada, Mexico, Peru and Brazil, is likely to insist that labelling should be compulsory only for foods with detectable GM ingredients, and which "differ significantly from a corresponding existing food". These countries oppose comprehensive labelling because there is no evidence of specific health hazards.

A likely focus of debate at the meeting will be the issue of 'substantial equivalence'—the concept that GM food can be considered equivalent to non-GM food providing there are no changes to its composition, nutrition-



Battle field: opposition to GM crops by environmental groups has stimulated public fears about their safety and demands that all GM food should be clearly labelled. But the United States, backed by several countries, continues to argue that there is no scientific basis for this.

al value and intended use (see Briefing, page 652). Countries such as India, Norway and Denmark, together with consumer groups, argue that substantial equivalence has yet to be proven scientifically.

These countries have joined Consumers International (CI), a worldwide federation of 246 consumer groups, in calling for all foods produced with GM techniques to be labelled as such, regardless of the presence of GM ingredients in the final product.

The disagreement hinges on whether consumers have a right to know whether a product has been manufactured using GM

technology. The United States is opposed to this, arguing that such labelling implies that GM technology is inherently unsafe, a conclusion for which it says there is no evidence.

The United States says that such labelling will be costly and complicated where food is manufactured from ingredients taken from a number of sources. It does not see a need to label food containing novel genes if its nutritional content, for example, is unchanged.

Stuart Eizenstat, US under-secretary of state for economic, business and agricultural affairs, wrote in the *Financial Times* last week that the United States will not accept "labelling that is misleading and [which] implies GM products are somehow dangerous or of lesser quality, when scientific evidence, testing and approvals show no risk to human health".

In a strongly worded attack on the EU, Eizenstat alleged that its procedures for testing and approving biotechnology products were "not transparent, not predictable, and not based on scientific principles". He added that EU calls for more research on the safety of GM products were a smokescreen "to justify keeping its trade restrictions in place".

But CI says that labelling is not just an issue of health and safety. Julian Edwards, its director-general, said in a statement that "there is no difference in the 'safety' of *halal* or organic foods, for example, but they are, nevertheless, labelled to enable consumer choice".

CI says that surveys from many countries indicate widespread public support for comprehensive labelling of GM foods. For example, 92 per cent of respondents to a survey by the UK Consumers' Association wanted GM food to be labelled, regardless of the presence of a GM ingredient in the final product.

The outcome of the debate could be significant if the United States makes a complaint about European procedures to the World Trade Organization. Ehsan Masood

US sets up 'round-table' talks with scientists

[WASHINGTON] The US State Department has invited scientists to organize a round-table conference on genetically modified (GM) foods. The meeting would be the first of a series of discussions with researchers intended to strengthen officials' grasp of key technical issues.

Frank Loy, under-secretary of state for global affairs, also says the department should appoint a science adviser with direct access to the secretary of state, Madeleine Albright.

Speaking last week at the annual science policy symposium of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) in Washington, Loy announced a five-point plan to address criticism of how

his department handles scientific and technical issues. "We're very sensitive to your concerns," he told those at the meeting.

Loy said the new science adviser should serve the secretary of state and be supported by a small number of staff. He hopes to have the adviser in place by next autumn.

The adviser should organize "round-table discussions" involving "recognized experts on a particular issue", said Loy.

Rather than waiting for the adviser's appointment, he proposed that the department, the National Academy of Sciences and the AAAS should "work together right now to organize the first of these discussions". The topic would be GM

organisms, "particularly genetically modified agricultural products".

He said that trade in such products "will pose major issues for US policy-makers in the years to come".

Loy proposed more science training for department staff, initiatives to bring more scientifically qualified staff into the department, and greater effort to "use science as a tool for diplomacy".

Robert Stern, a consultant who chairs the industrial science section at AAAS and has worked on the State Department issue, says that Loy's offer to consult with the community through the AAAS represents a challenge for the organization. "Now we've got to organize a response." Colin Macilwain