

Germany seeks 'non-modified' food label

[MUNICH] As European Union member states continue to argue about how genetically engineered foods should be labelled, Germany and Austria are each struggling with the problem of how non-genetically engineered foods should be defined and labelled.

Farmers and some food manufacturers would like to be able to label their products as being free of genetically modified organisms (GMOs), but are afraid to do so without clear rules about permissible levels of contamination with foreign DNA.

Given the increasing number of GMOs in the environment, they say, even the most careful producers cannot guarantee that their products will be free of contamination by these organisms' DNA. The producers want to be able to sell their products as GMO-free despite this unavoidable contamination.

A head-on confrontation emerged in Bavaria, Germany, last week between a coalition of environmental pressure groups and religious groups, and the Bavarian government, led by the conservative Christian Social Union (CSU). The critics want a system of labelling that would allow a small amount of contamination. But the government is advocating a system requiring evidence of no contamination at all before a label is approved.

The coalition says that such a requirement would undermine the concept of labelling because no food producer would be able to risk making such a claim. To undermine labelling in this way, it says, would undermine consumer choice. The coalition accuses the Bavarian government of acting in the interests of major food producers, which oppose the concept of labelling according to the presence or absence of GMOs.

But the Bavarian government says that allowing any level of contamination in a food labelled as GMO-free would deceive consumers. Last December, the government put forward a bill to regulate labelling of GMO-free foods, which it sees as "a model for regula-



tion at the federal and European Union (EU) levels which are at the moment missing".

The coalition, Gentechnikfrei aus Bayern ('produced without using genetic engineering techniques from Bavaria'), has collected enough signatures to allow it to begin formally to initiate a referendum on whether the electorate would accept low-level 'accidental' contamination in food labelled GMO-free.

The coalition proposes that food products qualifying for the Gentechnikfrei aus Bayern label should follow strict production rules. For example, any animal whose meat is used must not have been fed on genetically engineered soya beans or cereals. Samples must also be regularly analysed for purity.

A similar initiative in the north German state of Lower Saxony, Gentechnikfrei aus Niedersachsen, has been received more sympathetically by local politicians. But the state government agrees with Bavaria that the local origin of the product — Bavaria or Lower Saxony — should not be mentioned on the label. It wants to move as soon as possible to federal, or even EU, rules.

Lower Saxony is one of several social democrat *Länder* (states) that have asked the Bundesrat, Germany's parliamentary upper house, to draw up federal legislation on the

labelling of non-genetically engineered foods. They are proposing that a low level of contamination should be allowed, without a defined threshold, on the grounds that appropriate tests are not available. 'Low level' would be defined on a case-by-case basis.

Horst Seehofer, the federal health minister, has promised to draw up a list of criteria for labelling food as GMO-free by the beginning of next month. So far, however, Seehofer, who is a member of the Bavaria-based CSU, has not indicated what position he is likely to take on contamination levels.

Austria is the only EU country close to legislating on how GMO-free products should be defined and labelled. Last December a coalition called AGL, incorporating supermarkets, food manufacturers, organic farmers and environmental groups, produced criteria for controlling the production of GMO-free foods, and set a level of permissible contamination of protein encoded by foreign genes at 0.1 per cent of product weight. AGL spokesman Florian Faber says that this level was chosen fairly arbitrarily.

Some Austrian food producers have already started to use the label to which the AGL certification procedures entitles them. But this month an advisory panel to the Austrian food regulatory office suggested stricter rules for controlling production.

Unlike AGL, the panel would not grant a GMO-free label to cheeses made with chymosin (rennin) derived from the stomachs of calves that had been reared on milk from cows fed with genetically engineered food. The panel also suggests that the extent of allowable 'unavoidable contamination' should be decided case by case according to the availability of suitable analytical tests.

Contamination is mainly likely to occur through imported animal feeds or storage in containers that previously held genetically manipulated products. Currently, as in Germany, virtually no genetically engineered crops are grown in Austria, making contamination through cross-pollination unlikely.

Most scientists agree that it is virtually impossible to rule out completely the risk of DNA contamination, given the widespread presence of GMOs that have been deliberately released and the difficulty of accurately detecting low levels of contamination.

Biotechnology companies are rushing to develop sensitive tests for potentially contaminating genes and the European Commission is supporting research on the topic.

There is an irony in the apparent inversion of values about labelling GMO-free foods, says Faber. "Organic farmers and consumer protection groups are demanding the right to have contamination, while big food companies are saying there should be none," he says.

Alison Abbott & Burkhardt Roeser

ANZAAS looks to grassroots for relaunch

[SYDNEY] The 110-year-old Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science (ANZAAS) is seeking to re-establish itself following the election of a new council last week. The former council members resigned en masse two months ago when they failed to secure sufficient votes for their recommendation to dissolve the organization (see *Nature* 391, 4; 1998).

The association's new chair is Paul Adam, a biologist at the University of New South Wales and head of one of the three

state divisions that had opposed dissolution.

The association's aims — to promote communication, interaction, public awareness and the curiosity of children — remain "as relevant and important as ever to the future of science in Australia", says Adam. Initially, ANZAAS will refocus its activities at the local and regional levels, with an emphasis on serving young scientists and science teachers, rather than mounting national congresses. Such congresses failed to attract significant numbers in recent years.

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