GM vines: focal point for EC power struggle

The European Parliament has approved a set of amendments to directive 68/193 covering the marketing of material for the vegetative propagation of the vine to include vines that are genetically modified. Although the draft doesn't mark any real change in European legislation with respect to GMOs, the way it was reached suggests a subtle shift in European Community politics and attitude to anti-GMO extremism.

Under normal EU procedure, legislation is periodically updated to take into account new technical advances so as to remove unnecessary trade barriers. Because 68/193 was set up before the advent of genetic modification of vines, updating it thus required consideration of whether or not to include GM vines.

When a GM crop is not covered by particular legislation, it falls under the jurisdiction of 90/220, which is governed by the council of environment ministers. In the case of approvals of new GM crops, or when an EU member state invokes Article 16 in order to ban a GM crop on environmental grounds, it is the council of environment ministers that has the deciding vote. However, political agreement by environment ministers from several countries not to vote has in effect created a regulatory block of GM crop approvals and resolution of bans (*Nat. Biotechnol.* **18**, 589, 2000).

In an effort to circumvent this impasse, the European Commission, including the agriculture commissioner Franz Fischler, tried to have GM vines included in the sectorial legislation already set up for vines, away from the jurisdiction of 90/220: In February, the commission proposed that GM varieties come under 68/193, with an environmental impact assessment *equivalent* to 90/220. Because 68/193 is an agricultural, not an environmental, directive, this would have meant that the council of agricultural ministers, not environment ministers, would ultimately vote on approvals.

However, Green politicians, who have twice succeeded in erasing the vine issue from the Parliament agenda in the past thanks to filibustering, were unhappy with the idea of GM vines being out of the hands of environment ministers. They insisted that all GMOs should be governed by 90/220 and tried to delete all references to GMOs from 68/193. But although amendments proposed by the French Green Marie-Anne Isler-Béguin to this effect were unanimously

GM vines will still be approved by environment ministers.

approved by the committee on the environment, public health and consumer policy, they were defeated both by the committee on agriculture and rural development and in the parliamentary plenary vote on October 24—a move suggesting a lack of support for the most extreme Green position.

Moreover, indicating a rift among the Greens, the German Green and chair of the committee on agriculture Graefe zu Baringdorf proposed that GM vines be referenced in 68/193, but that 68/193 stipulates that GM varieties be governed by 90/220—basically meaning that environment ministers will continue to vote on approvals, but that marketing of GM vines will be managed by an agriculture committee. This amendment was approved by the committee on agriculture (30:2) and the EP (427:83).

After discussions by the ambassadors of the 15 member states, the council of agriculture ministers will decide whether or not to adopt the updated legislation, which stipulates clear labeling and approval of GM plant materials and their products under directive 90/220 covering the release of GMOs into the environment. It also stipulates that member states must accept one another's certified varieties (both GM and conventional), but aims to preserve the biological diversity of vine varieties and specific regional wine appellations by making a clear distinction between "variety" and "genotype."

In Italy, which exports over $2 billion of wine from non-GM vines a year, the decision has been interpreted by certain groups as a green light for GM wine and a threat to local varieties. "Italy will block this directive striking up an alliance with the other European countries which are wine producers," proclaimed the Green Italian Minister for agriculture Alfonso Pecoraro Scanio. However, the revised 68/193 simply provides for managing the marketing of GM vines should they ever be approved under 90/220, and is therefore unlikely to have any effect on exports: every GM vine will first have to be authorized under 90/220—and is therefore likely to get stuck in the regulatory impasse—and every GM wine will have to satisfy directive 258/97 covering novel foods and ingredients—a regulation that is also being abused as a political instrument for arbitrary bans, as illustrated by Italy's rejection of GM maize products last year (*Nat. Biotechnol.* **18**, 1137, 2000).

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EC study reveals an informed public

A European Commission-funded study of Public Perceptions of Agricultural Biotechnology in Europe (PABE) will be published this month. It finds that the public's reaction to GMOs has been influenced by the misassumption—on the parts of not only regulatory authorities, scientists, and industry, but also non-governmental organizations (NGOs)—that the public needs to be educated, rather than consulted.

The PABE study was commissioned by the 4th Framework Fisheries, Agriculture and Agro-Industrial Research programme as an exercise in "better understanding of the public." Between June 1998 and June 2000, 14 focus groups comprising about 6 people in France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and UK were presented with a series of questions and statements and their responses and discussion recorded. Those questions and statements were compiled after interviewing the major players—biotech companies, agro-food firms, large food distributors, ministries, regulatory bodies, scientists, farming trade unions, and environmental and consumer NGOs—and surveying literature produced by them and, as such, represented a list of assumptions these groups have about public attitudes to GMOs.

Analysis of responses shows the public wants to know why GMOs are needed, who will benefit from their use and under what circumstances, who decided they should be developed and how, and who will be accountable in the case of unforeseen harm.

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