

Cartagena Protocol

The Biosafety (Cartagena) Protocol agreed in Montreal in January 2000 was signed by 130 countries and means that a ban on GM products will be legal under World Trade Organisation rules, if a country believes there is insufficient evidence to show it is safe. Central to the Protocol is the establishment of a so-called advanced informed agreement (AIA) under which GMO exporters must inform the importing country in advance of any shipment of GMOs which could or will be released into the environment. Industry has welcomed the fact that the protocol will not cover GM-containing healthcare and pharmaceutical products, or products based on GMOs, such as GM enzymes. GMOs intended for contained use in research and development and those in transit through a country are also exempt. Despite the fact that the protocol covers GM seeds, the millions of tonnes of commodities such as soya, which are intended for food, feed and processing, will not be included in AIA obligations – but they must be labelled as “may contain GMOs”. The European Union (EU) and the developing countries were aligned against the US and Canada, which produce 66% of the world’s total of genetically modified crops; EU countries could now reject imports on safety grounds.

European food authority

The European Commission has revealed proposals for a 3-year programme to alter EU food legislation, leading to the formation of an independent European food authority. The authority will, however, have no regulatory powers – unlike the FDA in the US. If the proposals are approved by the Parliament and EU Members, the authority will start operating by 2002. Legislation will include regulations on labelling foodstuffs that contain no GM ingredients, a directive for maximum pesticide residues in food and agricultural products; a revision of the EU list of approved food additives; and the setting up of a central system for authorizing of novel animal feeds (GM products included).

Anger over OP ban

There has been an angry response from sheep industry leaders and vets over the UK government’s decision to suspend licences for organophosphate (OP) pesticide dips on the grounds of an alleged health risk to farmers pending redesign of containers. Talks are taking place to get the

government to agree to a limited dipping programme to control sheep scab, which has been difficult without OPs. Sheep-dip concentrates in modified containers are extremely unlikely to be back on sale in time for the summer 2000 dipping season.

UK off-label pesticide approvals

According to the Horticultural Development Council, a novel database of crop protection methods and problems should help secure much needed off-label approvals. The database will bring together existing research plus grower and technical staff knowledge on more than 300 crops. It is intended that this will highlight areas of crop protection where new research or specific off-label approvals are most required.

UK consumer exposure guidelines updated

The UK’s Pesticides Safety Directorate (PSD) has produced a consolidated guidance document for assessing consumer exposure to pesticide residues. The main changes are that consumption data are now provided for toddlers for assessing chronic exposure. These will be included in the new release of the UK consumer model which will shortly be added to PSD’s Web site. Also consumption data for acute intakes have been updated. The methodology for carrying out deterministic estimates of consumer exposure has been updated to reflect recent international developments. PSD has actively pursued the development of acute intake models since it hosted the International Conference on Pesticide Residue Variability and Acute Dietary Risk Assessment in December 1998.

EPA guidelines on planting Bt corn

The EPA has issued new guidelines for the cultivation of *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt) corn with the aim of protecting against the development of Bt toxin-resistant insects and to protect organisms that are not targeted. The guidelines require that at least 20% of cornfields are planted with non-Bt corn. Where corn is grown in cotton-growing areas, 50% of the corn grown must be non-Bt corn. This is because over 50% of cotton grown in the US is Bt-modified. If producers and sellers of Bt corn do not impose these demands on farmers, products up for registration in 2001 will not be registered. The EPA is also

asking that seed producers make sure that farmers plant some traditional corn around the edges of fields to protect monarch caterpillars and other non-targeted creatures. Seed producers will also have to expand monitoring activities.

No UK pesticide tax?

The UK government will not include the introduction of a pesticide tax in its April 2000 budget. It will now try to minimise the environmental impact of pesticides through voluntary action by the agrochemicals industry. This follows talks with the British Agrochemicals Association, which the government said had put forward proposals which form a useful basis for a partnership approach. Whether the tax is actually dead or just temporarily unconscious, however, remains to be seen.

Slow UK pesticide approvals

According to agrochemical manufacturers UK growers are being denied useful pesticide products because new chemicals are not reaching the market as rapidly as they might and companies are concerned that the UK is over-zealously applying approval rules. According to the British Agrochemicals Association, one reason could be that regulators granting 5-year provisional UK authorisation for new active ingredients are trying to second-guess EU requirements for getting the chemicals onto the Annex 1 list under EC Directive 91/414. The UK’s compliance with the directive is already among the strictest in Europe. Provisional approval can be delayed by a single paper raising new doubts about a chemical’s effects on the environment.

Methyl bromide in California

The California Department of Pesticide Regulation (DPR) has proposed limitations on the use of methyl bromide. The restrictions include a 100-ft buffer zone, limits on the exposure of employees, and public notification requirements. Producers of pesticides are worried that the rules will form the model for regulations in other states. Activists say tougher limits are necessary to protect the public and assist US farmers in achieving the 50% phaseout due by the end of 2000. Producers say the absence of suitable alternatives will make it difficult to meet the protocol’s demands. DPR expects to finalise the rules by the end of June 2000.

National Research Council report on GM

In a recent report the US National Research Council (NRC) (the principal operating agency of both the National Academy of Sciences and the National Academy of Engineering in providing services to the government, the public, and the scientific and engineering communities) (<http://www.nas.edu/nrc/>) said that the US Government should adopt "flexible" rules to the regulation of GM crops that can be updated "to reflect improved scientific understanding". It argues that there is no clear distinction between traditional plant breeding and the new scientific methods for gene alteration. The NRC report states that "just because a plant is modified, does not

mean it is dangerous". The NRC also said it was not aware of any evidence that foods containing GM ingredients on the market today were unsafe to eat.

Snippets

...an FAO project, financed by USAID, plans to move 1500 tonnes of obsolete pesticides, stockpiled at more than 400 sites in Ethiopia, to eight central sites, and to clean up the old stores. Once collected, the containers of pesticides will be shipped to developed countries for incineration. For further information contact alemayehu.wodageneh@fao.org

... UK off-label arrangements for the use of

pesticides in minor crops are to continue under the Long Term Arrangements for Extension of Use (2000) scheme which came into force on 1 January 2000; these arrangements will be reviewed after 5 years. Present arrangements for Specific Off-label Approvals (SOLAs) remain unchanged.

... a number of UK retailers, including the Co-op, have put a ban on products containing the insecticide lindane because of pressure from activists. The product has been linked to breast cancer in humans and endocrine disruption in animals. Activist groups have asked UK government pesticide advisors to propose a UK ban on lindane when they meet later in February.

GM FOOD SAFETY: FACTS, UNCERTAINTIES AND ASSESSMENT

This OECD conference, hosted by the UK Government and held from 28 February to 1 March 2000 at Edinburgh, brought together 400 participants from more than 40 countries, representing governments, industry and non-governmental organisations such as Greenpeace International, Friends of the Earth and GeneWatch. Its conclusions form part of an ongoing programme of work at the OECD on biotechnology, and will serve as input into a report that the OECD will submit to the Group of Eight industrial countries (G8) for their summit at Okinawa, Japan, in July 2000.

Agreement

The rapporteurs of the conference, Peter Tindemans (Dutch scientific consultant) and Iain Gillespie (UK Department of Health) identified a number of points on which they said there was a general agreement among the majority of participants

- The need for more open, transparent and inclusive debate

- The need for openness and transparency in the policy process
- Acknowledgement that there is potential benefit to be gained from GM technology
- No significant ill effects on human health had yet been detected amongst consumers eating GM foods

Disagreement

Some participants regarded human health aspects of GM foods as inseparable from wider issues, such as the impact on the environment, trade and socio-economic factors and belief systems. There was also disagreement on whether genetic modification is part of a continuum in the development of tools for plant breeding, or a fundamental change in the way new crops are produced, necessitating new ways of assessing food safety.

A further point of contention concerned the issue of whether individual countries should be allowed to develop GM technology for food production according for their own needs, or whether there should be a global moratorium on GM crops. In addition, there was a lack of complete agreement on such issues as the

mandatory labelling of GM foods, the usefulness of animal feeding trials for GM foods, and on the process of assessing consumer concerns.

Call for an International Consultative Panel

The OECD conference ended with a call from the conference chairman, Sir John Krebs (Professor of Zoology at Oxford University, UK, and Chairman-Designate of the future UK Food Standards Agency) for the creation of an international consultative panel to address all sides of the GM debate. The idea, Sir John said, was that the panel should be "to inform rather than to make policy", but it should address not just agricultural and food aspects of biotechnology but also a range of other issues including trade, economic development, and environmental and ethical questions.

Further information

Further details of the conference can be found on the OECD's website at <http://www.oecd.org>