COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

Brussels, 29 February 2008 (OR. fr)

7128/08

ENV 135
AGRILEG 34

NOTE

from	General Secretariat
to	Delegations
Subject :	GMOs: Exploring the way forward

Delegations will find attached a note from the French delegation on the above question, which will be examined under "Other business" at the Council meeting (Environment) on 3 March 2008.

GMOs: Exploring the way forward

Genetically modified organisms (GMOs) are a controversial issue in France and in other European Union countries. Many questions are raised about them among the public, certain agricultural production sectors, elected representatives and non-governmental organisations, in particular with regard to the potential impact of GMOs on health, the environment, the economy of agricultural systems and biodiversity.

At the national environment forum which took place in 2007, the various stakeholders concerned by the GMO issue, in particular by the unconfined use of genetically modified plants (GMPs), were brought together around the same table in accordance with the wishes of the President of the Republic. For the first time in our country, consensus was reached on questions which should be taken into account in the development of GMP use, and the following conclusions were adopted:

- Increasing knowledge and public research into GMOs and biotechnology, in a field extended to include subjects such as ecotoxicology, microbial ecology and agricultural economics;
- Establishment of a High Authority on Biotechnology at national level with independent, multidisciplinary and civic scientific expertise;
- Adoption of a law on GMOs based in particular on the principles of responsibility, precaution, transparency, participation and information, and freedom of choice to grow GMO or non-GMO crops.

In the bill submitted to the French Parliament, the government was therefore able to propose a basis for rules for the coexistence of crops. However, the questions raised not only by a large majority of French citizens but also by experts, stakeholders and scientists are not confined to the issue of coexistence. Scientific and field observations over the last few years have led to consideration of these concerns in greater depth.

With regard to expertise, France recognises that the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) has been stepping up the dialogue on GMOs with Member States since 2006 by involving national evaluation bodies and the European Food Safety Authority in order to define new evaluation criteria in a harmonised way. In its report published on 31 January, the EFSA therefore set out approaches concerning the development of GMO evaluation methodology which, in our view, should be examined in greater depth under the auspices of the Commission.

France welcomes the work carried out by the Commission, which presented a series of proposals at the Council meeting on 27 June 2006 to improve the decision-making procedure for authorisation of GMOs (independence, excellence, multidisciplinary approach and transparency of expert opinions). In particular in the context of the French Presidency, it wishes to resume and pursue these reflections and the discussion on expertise and evaluation with governments, members of parliament and the European federations concerned.

The following questions could be discussed:

1. Is it not necessary to give an impetus to the reform of expertise and evaluation at European level, in particular with regard to the multidisciplinary character of working parties of scientific experts, systematically taking account of the most up-to-date knowledge in all scientific areas, transparency of the evaluation carried out and really taking Member States' opinions into consideration?

2. With regard to GMOs that produce insecticide molecules or are herbicide-resistant, should not the possibility of bringing the criteria for evaluating these GMOs into line with those used for the evaluation of plant health products be explored? Discussions could be held in order to introduce more effective protocols, in particular in the field of toxicology.

3. While decisions on GMOs must continue to be based on the scientific principles of health and environmental risk evaluation, could consideration not also begin to be given to taking into account other legitimate factors, such as agronomic impact, or the impact of their use on the various modes of production? The potential benefits of some GMOs in the medium to long term, such as their effect on the use of plant protection products, could shed a useful light on the issue for public decision-makers before they decide whether or not to authorise the marketing of certain GMOs.

4. It seems very important in terms of ensuring the coexistence of agricultural systems that labelling thresholds for GMO seeds should be adopted very rapidly at European level, as provided for in Article 21 of Directive 2001/18/EC. What criteria are relevant in determining those thresholds?

During the next few months, the competent French authorities would like to contact the authorities in the other Member States about these questions and other related issues which seem relevant to them. Following these preliminary exchanges, they would like to promote a common move towards proposals, which could appear as a formal item on the agenda for the Council on 5 June 2008, if the Presidency agrees.

France would also like to announce that, in the context of its Presidency, it will be arranging an event on this subject, focusing on the relationship between the use of animal and plant biotechnologies and biological diversity, as well as on the development of public policies connected to genetic engineering. It will take place in Paris at the end of October 2008, and will be an important occasion for experts on these issues to exchange their views.