

Co-existence of genetically modified, conventional and organic crop plants – THE FREEDOM OF CHOICE

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The rules of coexistence of Lower Austria - requirements for regulatory frameworks in the EU

Lower Austria possesses a richly composed landscape with the corresponding pattern of small farms.

50% of its operations cultivate less than 20 hectares, 85% less than 50 hectares.

It has a high proportion of ecologically producing operations (about 10 %).

A large part of the population strictly rejects GMO products.

The commercial businesses therefore also see no reason to carry such kinds of products.

Contrariwise, the proportion of organic products has been constantly growing.

Current regulatory provisions in Lower Austria are:

The Lower Austrian Genetic Engineering Safeguard Law dated June 30th, 2005, regulating the cultivation of GMOs, the safety precautions for co-existence.

One of its most important provisions is that the deployment of genetically modified organisms must be approved by the provincial government.

Severe penalties are prescribed in the event of the law being violated.

The basis for this law is formed by

- The EU's Directive on the Deliberate Release of GMOs into the Environment (2001/18/EC) and
- The Recommendation of the Commission dated July 23rd, 2003 (Guidelines for the development of national strategies and best practices to ensure the co-existence of genetically modified crops with conventional and organic farming).

A number of points from this Guideline that have been implemented with the law in Lower Austria are:

- Freedom of choice for both the farmers and the consumers
- No form of agriculture – whether conventional, organic, or production systems supported by GMOs – is excluded.
- The unintended presence of GMOs on agriculturally exploitable fields must be avoided.
- The GMOs may only be deployed under compliance with those precautionary measures which are considered necessary according to the state of the art of science and technology.

Additionally, a federal guideline for such co-existence is being worked out, which will form the professional foundation for detailed ordinances. In the course of authorising GMOs, the behaviour of the GMOs relative to specific species and varieties, the differing production objectives (being made for consumer crops or for seeds, for example), regional aspects (form and size of the fields in a region, climatic conditions, landscape features, how the surroundings are configured) and any genetic protective measures that may be needed (for example, segregated planting areas, or differing planting times to counter cross-pollination, thus minimising genetic flow) are to be taken into account.

Coming into consideration as concrete requirements are:

- Maintenance of safety spacing or buffer zones
- Installation of pollen traps or barriers
- Maintenance of appropriate crop rotation and planning for staggered blossoming and harvesting periods
- The selection of specific sowing periods and appropriate cultivation methods

With the Lower Austrian Genetic Engineering Safeguard Law, Lower Austria is well equipped.

Both consumer and producer have freedom of choice, and can rely on the products.

Up to now no applications for deployment of GMOs have been lodged. The reason for this does not lie in the exaggerated severity of the law, but rather in the unfavourable overall conditions for cultivating GMOs in Lower Austria.

On the one hand, the configuration of the countryside and the small plot sizes demand a relatively large expenditure of effort, while on the other hand genetically modified products are not in demand, and are practically not saleable.

In order to optimise the effectiveness of the strategies towards co-existence, further research and a more intensive exchange of experiences are necessary at the EU level.

Uniform scientific foundations are a pre-condition for reaching comprehensible and transparent decisions in the course of approval procedures.

The present regulation in the recommendations of the Commission on co-existence in the area of national boundaries is limited to a recommendation of cross-border cooperation between the neighbouring countries.

Lower Austria is conducting thoroughly positive talks with representatives from the adjacent Czech Republic, and there also exists understanding and the willingness for a joint solution. We are separated from Slovakia by the River March with its adjacent marsh zones.

An EU-wide regulation for the border areas, such as the general adherence to buffer zones along national boundaries to depend on the plant species involved, for example, would certainly be sensible.

At the same time, for instance, the seed production with seeds guaranteed to be free of GMOs has evolved well over the past few years. In the course of an employment of GMOs growing worldwide, it also appears to be scientifically interesting to find a niche with GMO-free products.

Wood Quarter, genetic-engineering-free zone:

The Wood Quarter in north-western Lower Austria has traditionally concentrated on regional products, on unsullied Nature and on purity.

With the Wood Quarter as a genetic-engineering-free zone, this image will continue to be promoted.

Previously, more than half of the conventional farmers and organic farmers have voluntarily declared themselves prepared to cast their lot with agriculture free of genetic engineering and to employ no genetically modified seeds.

In summary, it can be pointed out that Lower Austria, building on the guidelines and recommendations of the EU, has created a clear set of regulations with the Lower Austrian Genetic Engineering Safeguard Law, which provides both producers and consumers with safety and transparency. Because of the underlying conditions in Lower Austria and the preferences of its consumers, up to now the production of GMOs has been a dead issue. In the final analysis, the consumers determine the course of further developments with their buying behaviour.