

Josef Pröll

Agriculture and Environment Minister

Address on the occasion of the Conference

“Co-existence of genetically modified, conventional and organic crops – freedom of choice”

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(Check against delivery)

Dear Members of the European Commission, esteemed Vice-Chairman of the Committee on Agriculture, dear Colleague Ministers, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I just came back from the COP8/MOP3 meeting in Curitiba last week. The discussion was dominated by two topics:

- First, how will GMOs in the border-crossing trade between contracting parties be labelled in future? In this respect a compromise in terms of more rigid labelling provisions could be reached.
- And also the second prominent topic was related to the use of genetic engineering in agriculture and is a very sensitive issue from the ecological point of view, namely the so-called terminator technology. In particular this technology would mean a massive interference in existing rights, the so-called

farmers' privilege and the breeders' privilege. Biodiversity could suffer extremely from accidental cross-breeding with wild plants. An agreement was also reached by the contracting party as far as this topic is concerned, they decided in favour of a cautious approach and of renouncing this technology.

I am particularly delighted that we have the opportunity to relaunch in a special conference here in Vienna at the initiative of Austria, just now, a broad discussion on the use of genetic engineering in agriculture and on the risks and opportunities, but especially also on the open questions related to it.

I am very pleased to be able to discuss with you a topic which constitutes one of the most important challenges for our agriculture and our food industry. Namely the question: "How can we guarantee that the use of genetic engineering in agriculture does neither cause economic damage to our farmers, nor lead to a new feeling of insecurity in our society?" Because, apart from the purely economic consequences I consider it to be necessary according to the principle of sustainability not to forget about questions going beyond that such as social and ecological aspects of the discussion.

The title of the conference – freedom of choice – is in fact quite self-explanatory.

The question is not “Genetic engineering yes or no.”

This question has already been answered by Europe, namely by means of a rigid, and in the meantime – as it seems - internationally accepted authorisation and labelling regime. This necessary freedom of choice for our responsible consumers and economic actors is also accepted within Europe and by various NGOs, even in the environmental sector.

Especially the improved rules on labelling and traceability (EC Regulations 1829 and 1830 of 2003), which entered into force almost exactly 2 years ago (14 April 2004), ensure for the first time that products which contain GMOs or are produced of GMOs have to be clearly labelled.

Strict labelling provisions are the basis for the freedom of choice of our most important ally, the consumer, between the various types of production. For we must all be aware of one thing: The real decision whether GMOs will be on our tables and thus also on our fields, is taken by all of us, the consumers.

Co-existence is not a question of YES or NO, but a question of HOW!

In the course of the next few days the discussion will focus on answering this question. The wide range of participants from different fields gives evidence of the complexity of this matter.

All of us, from representatives of politics, science, the seed, feed and food industries, to practitioners and consumers, are called upon to work out feasible solutions.

The consumers too are called upon to define their expectations and then, to act accordingly. According to the most recent Eurobarometer Survey of February 2006, genetic engineering ranks among the top concerns on the list of potential risks of nutrition, immediately behind health risks caused by chemicals and plant protection products residues. The consumers are extremely sensitized as far as this issue is concerned (58 of 100 points). Just for the sake of completeness I would like to mention that the results in the individual Member States differ considerably, the most negative attitude vis-à-vis GMOs was expressed by the Greek. Even though Austria holds the EU Presidency at the moment, I make no secret of the Austrian position on genetic engineering. It is sufficiently known that in Austria a vast majority, from farmers to consumers, rejects the cultivation of genetically modified plants.

The question why this negative attitude towards the use of GMOs is prevailing in the agriculture and food sectors has certainly different reasons, and I would like to mention two of them:

1. Information policy. I think we agree, without putting the blame for it on someone: The communications policy in the field of genetic engineering has been everything but exemplary worldwide in the past few years. Just think of the problems around Starlink or of the attempts to grow GMOs – even though for experimental purposes only - without providing full transparency to the population. Even big combines admit they made mistakes with respect to communication in the past.

Also the existing authorisation procedure has been increasingly in the limelight of public interest lately. On the one hand, GMOs are authorised only if they do not pose a risk to health or the environment. On the other hand, exactly for these important points discontent was recently expressed for example as regards the evaluation by EFSA. Protecting health and ensuring the ecological component, preserving biodiversity and the environment are issues on which we must not compromise.

Also scaremongering, which is sometimes practiced, has to be rejected. Political decision-makers are well advised to use serious scientific studies as the basis of their decisions.

Transparency and traceability in the authorisation of GMOs are important issues which must not be neglected.

We already started the public European discussion on this topic at the past Councils of Environment Ministers.

To finish with the aspect of communication: It is simply unacceptable to repeat and again repeat the argument that the hunger in the world has to be fought. We have to be more honest in our discussion if we wish to remain credible.

2. The second point why many people believe GMOs should rather stay where they have been developed (that is, in hermetically isolated laboratories) is that the genetically modified plants which are presently available do not (yet) offer substantial advantages for farmers and consumers. I think this is also the decisive difference why "red genetic engineering" has for a long time been an integral and accepted part of our life. Healing diseases, preserving our health or raising life expectancy are valued that high in our society - and this is justified also - that the question of how this is done is secondary.

Especially as regards possible benefits of "green genetic engineering" this technology is – even in view of the agricultural structures in Europe - still far from being accepted on the markets of users or final consumers.

To return to our actual task:

- How can we cultivate genetically modified, conventional and organic crops side by side without any of these management types being negatively affected?
- How can we ensure - for example by means of appropriate, reasonable rules for seed contaminations with GMOs, and for the time being irrespective of potential contaminations of other fields - that farmers who use seed which does not have to be labelled, that is: GMO-free seed, can also get in a harvest which does not have to be labelled as containing GMOs. Our experts have to find logical answers both to questions of statistics and to the questions of examination methods.

I see myself as an advocate of the environment and of farmers in this discussion and I plead for stringent regulations, as Austria has already practised in the past. We owe our farmers these stringent regulations.

By the way, also international combines signalise to me that the regulation of this topic is a priority issue and that also more stringent limit values are acceptable if only the legal situation were finally clear. The question has now been undecided at least since 2001.

The report presented by the Commission on the progress made in connection with the regulation of coexistence in Member

States, which I do not want to deal with in detail here, is a central part of the discussions at the Conference.

The report shows clearly that also the liability provisions are playing a crucial role in connection with coexistence.

The regulation of the question of liability will decide about the way in which financial risks, but also possible profits, will be distributed in the future.

There are already different regulations and approaches in Member States which, I think, require a minimum extent of harmonisation and also the development of political objectives. Just as much as the authorisation, the labelling or also the use of GMOs in organic farming are regulated on European level, I am firmly convinced that we need European principles for the regulation of coexistence and liability.

Also the question of GMO-free areas is a matter which everybody in Europe understands in a different way. I am anxious to know your opinion on this issue, Ladies and Gentlemen!

Coexistence cannot really be restricted to economic aspects: it goes beyond them. It does involve also ecological components; they can be discussed for example with respect to distance requirements. Why are distance requirements not also a question of authorisation? Should not the one who requests an authorisation know best which distances from neighbouring fields must be kept and also be liable for the information he

provides? All these questions will be addressed today. There are no sharp limits between the topics; even socio-political questions are involved.

Like other inventions of the past century biotechnology, and in particular genetic engineering, has without any doubt the potential of influencing life and society on our planet in a positive or negative way. However, if we really want to use this technology for our benefit, we must deal with it in a responsible manner and we must be able to answer all unsolved questions of its use beforehand - keyword "precautionary principle". I hope that this Conference will contribute to this vision and, through your active participation, will be able to serve as a starting point for a new, open discussion.

I wish you a lot of success for the Conference!