

Vienna, 4-6 April 2006

**Co-existence of genetically modified,  
conventional and organic crops**  
**FREEDOM OF CHOICE**



Workshop C

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**Consumer attitude and market response:  
viewpoints of stakeholders**



European Commission



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## **My background**

An un-disciplined social scientist

Worked (with complete autonomy) with DG Research on Eurobarometers of Biotechnology 1996-2005, member of the Science and Society Advisory Group for the 6<sup>th</sup> Framework Programme

An independent voice of behalf of the public

Occasionally criticised by industry, NGOs and sociologists, but as long as I offend all parties, I am content – and this goes for this presentation



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## **The Stakeholders at the discussion**

Land owners and Seed producers

Farmers: experience of conventional, organic and, GM

Associations of Industry and Retailers

Associations of Consumers and Environmentalists

Citizens as distinct from consumers – a key issue for agbiotec.



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## **The scope of the debate**

The ‘Spirit of the Enlightenment’: Many emphasised the importance of science, the priority of evidence over opinion and emotion

Yet, in reality, many extra-scientific issues were raised

Politics – science does not have all the answers

Values – what is progress, how do we achieve sustainability? what types of agriculture do we want?  
etc,



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## **Is it possible to constrain the public debate?**

Commissioner Fischer Boel set the meeting's agenda. If a crop is approved then it is safe in respect of health and the environment. The agenda for the conference, she said is solely co-existence.

Not in the Commission apparently – c.f. Mr Dimas

And not in session C – health and environmental impacts featured prominently

It would be imprudent to assume that the wider public debate will be any less unconstrained. The 'competent authorities' should not be surprised by this.



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## Diverging currents of opinion

On the one hand; a Europe wide veto on Agbiotec  
and GMOs/OGMs, until ---

And on the other; GMOs are part of the future but  
under appropriate regulatory frameworks for co-  
existence

A recipe for future convergence or an autistic  
debate, who can tell?

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## **Inevitably the ‘dismal science’ takes centre stage**

For the organic lobby – agbiotec is not about co-existence  
but the very existence of organic farming

For retailers – costs of a dual system, lack of consumer  
interest

For farmers – agbiotech could be a financial opportunity  
but in other circumstances a cost

For consumers – with the exception of gm tomato puree in  
the UK (95-96) the absence of benefits in price or quality  
did nothing to outweigh the potential downsides



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## Points of agreement

A coherent and transparent regulatory framework for co-existence – arguments in favour of EU regulation and subsidiarity

‘Bottom up’ local agreements (not laws) giving freedom of choice for farmers

Decisions based on science. But I have to say that science appears in the role of the management consultant – it tends to be accepted when it accords with prior expectations and opinions



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## Points of disagreement

### Thresholds

0.9% is workable others argue for 0.1% or the technical zero

A labelling threshold for the point of sale needs to be tighter in the earlier stage of the food chain

Is there a cost to the dual system? Some say no others argue that it might fall on the non-GM paths as they will need to demonstrate guarantees of non-GM traces



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## **Silent voices – for now**

European exceptionalism in the global society

What of the WTO – another non-tariff barrier?

What of farm exports from the poorer countries



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## **Final thoughts**

GM food is an emotive issue

If the innovators of agbiotec had read Fraser's Golden Bough they would have been introduced to 'magical thinking' – once touched always infected

Adulteration and contamination of food are deep rooted human concerns

Enlightenment thinking co-exists with primeval fears

A resolution to the debate on co-existence will be a long and rocky road



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