

Speech by Cees Veerman, Minister of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality at the EU Conference on Coexistence of genetically modified, conventional and organic crops – Freedom of Choice on 5 April 2006 in Vienna

Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all I would like to compliment Austria and the European Union for organising this conference.

It is important for Member States to be given this opportunity to learn from each other's experiences, especially on such an important and complex issue as coexistence.

As well as being a complex matter, coexistence is also a highly emotional one.

It is a subject that keeps many people occupied and can give rise to heated discussions.

The debate is often dominated by polarised views, which sometimes makes a dialogue hard to achieve.

This was also true of the Netherlands, where genetic modification in agriculture was a controversial issue at both public and political levels.

I truly believe that facing the fast and fundamental changes taking place in our world today, it is necessary to reflect on the way we as politicians are able to realize what is expected of us: organising or even better generating public trust and generating harmony between different views, opinions and interests. In my opinion old methods are becoming more and more obsolete or even controversial. Modern citizens or consumers do not accept rules or laws as given. They need to be convinced and dialogue therefore is essential. Communication with the people we are representing means in the first place listening to them. And the authority of the state is not self evident anymore. Laws and regulations can no longer simply be imposed on them. And should not be imposed on them because modern people should be held responsible to accept solutions that are created mainly by themselves by a process of dialogue. Politics are not made solely in parliament, on streets or in backrooms.

This meant that we had to work extra hard to achieve a dialogue, which, in my view, is the best way to solve such serious, controversial issues in society.

In such cases, I believe, the government should not start by imposing rules or sanctions, but first give the parties involved the opportunity to find a solution.

Our starting point therefore was a yearlong dialogue in and with society: a dialogue that managed to turn emotions – at least most of them – into practical terms of application / or non-application of biotechnology.

Now I come to today's theme of coexistence. I believe it is in the Netherlands' own best interest – and in fact it's the same for every country - to ensure proper regulation of coexistence.

We have opted for a strong agricultural sector to take us into the future.

This will only succeed if agriculture is sustainable.

And this means that we must observe the three Ps of sustainability: people, planet, profit.

I am convinced that not only organic farming, but also conventional and GMO production have their place in sustainable agriculture.

The Netherlands is therefore not opposed to the principle of gene technology.

This is not only my view, it is the general feeling in the country.

As I said, we organised a broad public debate; this as early as 2001.

The debate showed that the Netherlands are willing to exploit the opportunities offered by biotechnology for sustainable agriculture and a better environment.

But only under the strict conditions that it is safe and that the consumer is able to choose.

The applications also have to be ethically acceptable.

I, personally, would make one reservation on this point.

I believe we should certainly explore the possibilities for using biotechnology in plants, but I draw the line when it comes to animals.

Applying biotechnology on animals for food production is not in keeping in range with my beliefs and I know that many people feel the same about this.

But I think that for the time being, we will have our work ahead of us in exploring the opportunities offered by applying biotechnology to plants.

It is important that we allow this technology to prove itself.

I would like to share with you two examples from Dutch agricultural practice, which illustrate what we can gain from it.

These examples are both from the potato sector, which is no coincidence.

It may be some time since Van Gogh painted his *Potato Eaters*, but in the Netherlands we are still fervent potato-growers.

First there is the Dutch starch producer Avebe, which is developing a potato that only produces amylopectin starch.

This potato is intended solely for non-food applications, such as paper and textiles.

Because the processing of this potato requires less energy and fewer damaging products, it is better for the environment.

A second example is the development of a phytophthora resistant potato. This is a disease that is difficult to control and requires ever-increasing amounts of fungicide, which is costly, and puts considerable pressure on the environment.

For years, we have been investing in research, to find, together with the sector, ways to control the disease.

But this has not been enough.

That is why we welcome the possibilities offered by the phytophthora resistant potato, developed with GMO technology.

Last week my Government decided to invest 10 million Euros in further research.

I believe this is a responsible investment. Its success will mean we can halve the use of fungicides, which, apart from the environmental benefits, will save us 150 million Euros a year, and we will be able to retain many jobs in the Dutch agricultural sector.

Until a few years ago, the development of a resistant potato like this would not have been possible in the Netherlands, but sound agreements and a broad public debate have enabled us to do this.

I welcome this debate.

It can only be a good thing that now and again, as a society, we determine our position in this way and examine the interests at play.

We have to tread carefully where the application of biotechnology is concerned.

And we must guarantee that we do not cause damage to others. Damage to growers, for instance, who wish to remain completely gentech free, or damage to biodiversity, through admixture. Finally the GMO techniques are helpful to upgrade the speed of conventional plant breeding.

As I have already said, I do not believe that the government should stand in the way of new technological developments.

I do think, however, that the government has to protect the public interest on questions of health, safety and freedom of choice, as well as guarding specific interests, such as those of organic growers.

But I did not necessarily want to lay down these guarantees in law. It was my wish to give the parties themselves the opportunity to make agreements.

This stemmed from my belief that it would lead to more workable guidelines, which could rely on broader support and which – if regulation had to be introduced – would also be easier to enforce.

And so that's the way we did it in the Netherlands.

In 2004 I asked the various parties from the GMO, traditional and organic sectors to put their heads together.

I did this because I am convinced that it is they who are primarily responsible for putting a workable solution in place and creating support.

And this has been a success. They have – with my support – cooperated to draw up agreements which will make coexistence possible.

These agreements are the best that can be achieved for all parties, with freedom of choice for the consumer and producer as a starting point.

The conclusion is that GMO and GMO-free crops can both exist alongside each other.

This is important for future growers of GMO crops, but also for non-GMO growers.

These growers can now be sure that their interests are also guaranteed.

I do not want to bore you with the details of these agreements. They mostly involve technical matters, such as the buffer zones required between GMO and conventional crops, the obligation of GMO crop growers to provide prior information, the cleaning of harvesting machinery, and so on.

These agreements will minimise the chance of admixture and provide the opportunity to examine what biotechnology has to offer. We have now laid down these growing measures in a regulation that we have sent to Brussels for notification.

But we are not quite finished yet. We still have to reach agreement, for instance, on the scope and operation of a compensation fund for remaining damages and also a monitoring system in the field. A lot of effort is being put into this at the moment.

These agreements are important and form a solid basis for a continuing dialogue that allows us to find solutions with a broad base of support.

They also allow us to learn from each other's experiences. Biotechnology can help us make agriculture more sustainable. This is easier and achieved more speedily if GMO and non-GMO growers keep talking to each other and exchange information.

Ladies and Gentlemen

For coexistence we need sound, clear and workable agreements as well as mutual respect.

We can all agree on that.

And it works best if we have solutions, which everyone subscribes to.

I would therefore like to compliment the European Commission, which allows Member States themselves to find their solutions.

This makes the Dutch approach possible and feasible.

Finally, I am extremely interested to see the outcome of the cost-benefit analysis of biotechnology which the EU is working on, and will be published in 2007.

This study, and our conference today, will certainly help to deepen the debate on GMOs.

And this is not only useful, it is also vital.

A good dialogue, after all, not only requires mutual respect but also a thorough knowledge of the facts.

Thank you.