



Committee of Agricultural Organisations in the European Union  
General Confederation of Agricultural Co-operatives in the  
European Union



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**RISK PERCEPTION : SCIENCE, PUBLIC DEBATE  
AND POLICY MAKING**

**CHARLEMAGNE CONFERENCE CENTRE**

**BRUSSELS, 4-5 DECEMBER 2003**

*Risk perception of GM Agri-food - stakeholder forum A  
farmers/producers perspective By Peter Gæmelke,  
President COPA*

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honour and a great pleasure for me to speak at this conference on behalf of the European farmers. I believe the Commission has taken a very important initiative by arranging this conference.

Gene technology is one of the most important issues in the public discussion of modern agriculture. Gene technology is a tool that opens up for a tremendous row of new opportunities, but at the same time it is a subject for concern and uncertainties.

It is necessary that we have a balance approach to this subject: In COPA-COGECA we believe it is crucial that we push forward to develop the technology and the opportunities that arises therefrom. We do, however, also believe it is crucial to respect the concern and reluctant position that is prevailing in the European society regarding the new technologies.

It is a strange world we are living in now. It has probably never been safer to be a human being on this planet. At least in our part of the world. Here in Europe, we have never before in history had access to such a rich supply of food of high quality due to the tremendous increase in efficiency and production capacity in modern agricultural production.

The food has never been safer to consume than now due to the modern techniques of handling, conservation, and processing of food and the very strict inspection systems.

Many diseases that were fatal only half a decade ago can now be cured.

We therefore have the ability to remain healthy throughout life due to the improvements in nutrition, working environment and health care.

Nevertheless – or perhaps because of this – the European population has never before been more concerned and the public focus has never before been so strong on risks related to food. These risks – potential or real - is perhaps most clearly expressed in regard to future use of gene technology in agriculture and food production.

Even though we are in a strong position in Europe regarding food supply, health and improvement of the environment we still may go further – in this respect gene technology is one tool.

I do understand the reaction among farmers, consumers and decision makers. It is difficult to imagine what the future may bring when we open up for new developments. Gene technology is, however, already developed and a reality on the market.

Therefore we must focus on and secure that the technology is utilised in a safe way taking into account the precautionary principle. It is essential that genetically modified organisms are risk assessed and approved from case to case as it is laid down in the common European legislation.

We must participate in defining what the gene technology should be used for.

We must, however primarily make sure that the consumers and farmers have the freedom of choice to decide themselves whether they want the technology used or not. The regulations regarding trace-ability and labelling of GM food and feed and strategies for co-existence between GM, conventional and organic crops are important elements in this respect.

In COPA-COGECA we believe that we must be very careful to respect the right of the individual to be concerned. On the other hand we must, however, also respect the basis that has been set up to regulate the GM. In Europe we have the most strict legal basis in the world for risk assessment and approval before marketing.

Several surveys have shown that for many people, the unwillingness to accept GM crops is not based on a scientific based concern regarding risk for environment and health. It is more a concern regarding the overall power to decide the future. A rejection of big industries and monopolies.

COPA-COGECA can agree on this concern. COPA-COGECA also believes strongly in the necessity of farmers' freedom of choice regarding what crops we want to grow. This is, however, a general issue that is not solely or specifically related to the introduction of GM crops in agriculture.

On the other hand, it is very important that we take a scientific approach in relation to assessment of risk – and make sure this is the basis for our decision to allow

marketing of a specific genetically modified organism. This is the pre-condition for us farmers to grow GM crops. Whether I decide to grow GM crops is, on the other hand, a very complicated decision that is based on a number of elements.

Firstly, the crops shall be approved for marketing. The revised directive on deliberate release of GMO's 2001/18 has resulted in a substantial tightening of the provisions for approval and the introduction of mandatory post- marketing monitoring for unforeseen adverse effects. The regulation on genetically modified food and feed and the regulation on trace-ability and labelling adds further to the strict legislation.

Secondly, there must be provisions that secure co-existence. It is necessary to ensure that farmers themselves can decide to grow GM crops and other farmers can decide to grow non GM crops. In my own country, Denmark, The Danish Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Fisheries has for the past 18 months made a very detailed work on co-existence in co-operation with research institutions and stakeholders. This will lead to a proposal for a law that is expected to be presented next week.

The analysis shows that co-existence is possible when applying a number of basic means. These are in line with those that are described in the recommendation from the Commission of July 23rd 2003.

The last and not least important issue for me as a farmer to take into account is whether there is a market for my products. In this respect the public acceptance of genetically modified organisms is necessary. We therefore all have an interest in a more detailed dialogue about the possibilities and constraints – and to get to a closer understanding of this.

It is very difficult for me to accept that we keep stepping on the same spot claiming that the technology is new, that we don't want to use it, that we have no experience,

that we have not had a public debate on the subject – and using this, as an excuse for not taking the decisions to progress.

The discussion of risk perception must not be an excuse for what is the reality: a general opposition to gene technology. It is, however, a legitimate position to have. This should be addressed directly and not wrapped in in a range of concerns. It can be handled by ensuring that a broad range of products is developed without the use of gene technology.

As I said earlier – the reluctance to accept products based on gene technology is not based on a fear of it is dangerous. It is more a question whether the consumer sees direct advantages in the products.

We must admit that it is very difficult for the final consumer to see any advantages for him or her in herbicide tolerant GM crops. On the other hand shifting from conventional crops, where a mixture of many different herbicides are applied, to the use of one single less dangerous herbicide in a GM variety, may have very large environmental advantages.

This is for instance shown in Danish field experiments with genetically modified fodder beet, where the biodiversity within the field was substantially increased as the application of glyphosate was delayed up to one month compared to the intensive spraying 3 to 4 times with other herbicides. This meant that the GM fodder beet field was filled with a variety of weeds laying down the basis for a rich insect fauna and hence a large population of birds. The GM fodder beet hereby enriches the biodiversity compared to conventional weed control.

In the future, gene technology may be used for many other purposes that gives direct advantages for consumers – or improves the possibility for food supply in other parts of the world.

Gene technology may be applied in a number of other ways in the food production, for instance in the production of additives and ingredients. Gene technology may lay the basis for new methods for detecting pathogens and thereby improving the food safety.

In the future there may be much more obvious ways of using the technology in regard to crops with improved nutrient balance and digestibility.

It is very important that the ideal utilisation of the technology does not block the street for the good applications: We will never end up with the ideal utilisation's with direct advantages for the individual consumers and society at large, if we refuse the stepping stones on the road in the form of products and crops with minor improvements compared to the current "state of the art".

We must therefore be very careful not to deem the gene technology on the first generation of GM crops.

It is also crucial that the European society is willing to make up a strategy in regard to where we want to get to: We must have clear visions regarding what we want the technology used for – and which applications we can not accept.

We must furthermore be willing to spend the resources that are necessary in order to make sure the targets are met.

The European Strategy for bioscience and biotechnology is a very important tool in this regard.

It is also very important that the European Union and the Member States are willing to offer the necessary funding of this research and development. This funding must focus on developing basic technologies and new products. On genomics, post-genomics and prote-omics. It must, however, also put focus on understanding the reasons for the public resistance.

It is also very important that all stakeholders take each other's standpoints seriously and participates in an open dialogue on pros and cons. Only by dialogue we can get to a mutual understanding regarding in which direction the development should go.

In this process we must be direct in regard to which characters that are inserted into a specific organism. We must look broader and not focus on GM crops but also on the use in food industry and pharmaceutical industry. The discussion should not be for or against GMO – but a dialogue regarding what we want to use the technology to develop.

To summarise

- COPA-COGECA European Farmers and their co-operatives encourage the development of gene technology in the future as it may offer advantages for agriculture, food production, consumers and environment
- It is crucial that we have an open dialogue regarding the direction and pace of the development
- In Europe we have the most strict regulation on gene technology in the world – on that background there is a basis to reconsider the current state of moratorium and to seek co-existence
- It is very important that all stakeholders take each other serious and participates in an open dialogue with respect of each others standpoints.

- Gene technology is a reality. GM crops are grown worldwide. GM microorganisms are used worldwide. The basic need now is to look forward and define in what direction the development should go
- We must take into account the reluctance to accept the use of gene technology in agriculture and food production and understand the basic mechanisms behind this. On the other hand, we must also be more clear regarding the reason behind this. Is it really a fear of GM food being dangerous – or is it a fear of where the development may end up?
- I believe – and that is also the result of many research projects – that the resistance is not based on fear regarding the environment and health. The resistance is primarily related to what the future may bring. In my view the best way to handle this is to sit together at the table and participate in defining the future – and not to leave the discussion to others.
- Finally it is essential that decision makers stand by their decisions once they have adopted new legislation and thereby fulfilled the need for regulation. There are now only a few unregulated areas left, such as the seeds directives.
- It is my sincere hope that this conference may bring us a step forward. In stead of discussing for or against GMO's we should discuss the possibilities and conditions for development and use of specific GMO's and in this way participate in defining the future.

Thank you.