

NEWS RELEASE

Dublin, Monday 17 October 2005

Irish Doctors' Environmental Association

DOCTORS OPPOSE RELEASE OF GMO SEEDS

Irish Doctors' Environmental Association warns of GMO health risks Call for immediate ban on Monsanto's live GMO seeds

Dublin, 17 October 2005. The Irish Doctors' Environmental Association has today called for a ban on the importation of Monsanto's live GMO seeds.

The Association spokesperson Dr. Elizabeth Cullen said "the health risks of introducing genetically modified animal feed and agricultural crops into the food chain need to be as thoroughly researched as the introduction of drugs produced by GM bacteria into medicine. This is patently not the case."

The call follows an EC decision of 31 August to allow the importation of Monsanto's patented genetically modified GT73 rape seed for use as animal feed, despite opposition from the majority of EU member states because of unanswered food and feed safety questions (1). GT73 is very different from other GM animal feedstuffs now widely used by Irish farmers, because it consists of patented living GMO seeds that are certain to produce a crop when spilled. Cross contamination by seed dispersal, volunteers and wind-borne pollen will inevitably infect all wild and cultivated oilseed rape within a matter of years, and may also transmit the modified genes into 11 related food crops including broccoli, brussel sprouts, cabbage, cauliflower and turnips. A handful of spilled GT73 seeds would make it impossible for Irish farmers to grow non-GMO varieties of these food crops within a matter of years. (2)

Thirteen EU member states voted against the legalisation of GT73 following the discovery of a confidential Monsanto feeding study, which revealed potentially adverse effects including a 15% increase in the liver weight in rats. (3)

Monsanto still refuses to make the original data of these studies available for public scrutiny. (4)

GT73 oilseed rape is made tolerant to the herbicide glyphosate (produced by Monsanto under the brand name "Roundup") by introducing into the plant genetic material extracted from two different bacteria and a virus (5). Independent scientists say such transgenic organisms are genetically unstable and that their long-term health and ecological impacts are scientifically impossible to predict.

Serious and specific concerns about the health risks of GT37 have been expressed by the International Commission on the Future of Food and Agriculture, the US Center for Food Safety, the Union of Concerned Scientists, the Institute for Responsible Technology, the UK Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment, the Austrian Ministry of Health and Women, the Independent Science Panel on GM, the Institute for Science in Society, the Norwegian Institute of Gene Ecology, Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth.

Health concerns include the results of feeding studies which found an increase in the liver weight of rats, invalid tests for toxicology, and allergenicity tests that depended on widely questioned theoretical assumptions, rather than on actual testing. (6)

Moreover, evidence from the USA, Canada and Argentina shows that the introduction of "Roundup Ready" GM crops significantly increases the use of the weedkiller. This is of particular concern following the publication in June of new scientific evidence that the glyphosate-based herbicide may be 10 times more dangerous than previously known, with toxic effects on human placental cells, hormonal impacts, and lower sperm counts (7).

In 2000 the Government's Interdepartmental Group on Biotechnology recommended a thorough investigation of the health risks of GM foods (8). But in response to a letter from the Irish Doctors' Environmental Association, the Food Safety Authority of Ireland stated that neither it nor the European Commission have any plans to identify possible adverse health impacts from these foods on the human population (9).

At a Dáil Debate on GT73 in December 2004, the Food Safety Authority of Ireland admitted that it does not have the capacity to conduct GMO risk assessments, and that it depends on what it is told by the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA). (10)

But the EFSA has itself been widely criticized for failing to conduct comprehensive studies of the health risks of GM foods, and for relying on the risk assessments provided by Monsanto and the other biotech companies it is supposed to regulate. On 6 October, consumer, environmental and health groups across the EU challenged the European Food Safety Authority to fulfil its legal obligations to take into regard the long term safety and scientific uncertainties of GM foods, to review its scientific panels to make them impartial and independent from industry, and to improve its transparency. (11)

"Einstein once said that blind belief in authority is the greatest enemy of the truth," said Dr. Cullen. "Ireland should keep its GM-free status before it is contaminated beyond redemption. Genetic engineering of food is an unholy alliance between bad science and big business. The health of the Irish people must not be sacrificed in this no-win scenario."

[ENDS]

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Notes for editors

- (1) European Commission press release announcing the legalisation of GT73:
<http://www.gmfreeireland.org/news/index.php#EUGT73>

The EC decision to legalise Monsanto's patented GT73 oilseed rape came despite opposition from a majority of EU Member States in a December 2004 vote in which Environment Minister Dick Roche abstained, thus resulting in failure to reach the so-called Qualified Majority Vote needed to prevent the legalisation. This failure enabled the EC College of Commissioners to approve the controversial seeds against the wishes of the majority on 31 August. The majority voted against the application because of unanswered food and feed safety questions.

In December 2004, EU Environment Ministers voted with a simple majority against the approval of GT73 for use as animal feed. 13 Ministers voted against the approval (135 votes), 6 in favour (78 votes) and 6 abstained - including Ireland (108 votes). Here is the voting record of the 25 EU member states:

For: SK, SE, FR, PT, FI, NL (78 votes)

Against: IT, GR, DK, PO, MT, BE, HU, LT, LV, CY, AT, EE, LU (135 votes)

Abstention: IE (Ireland), SI, ES, DE, CZ, UK (108 votes)

For more info on this vote, visit http://www.foeeurope.org/press/2004/GR_20_Dec_Monsanto.htm

- (2) First live GMO animal feed legalized in the EU
GM-free Ireland press release, 2 September 2005:
<http://www.gmfreeireland.org/press/GMFI21.pdf>
- (3) The official UK government advisors on GM foods and feeds - ACRE and ACAF - have said that they are not satisfied with the explanation that Monsanto has provided for the observed increased liver weight in rats fed GT73. They are not convinced by EFSA's assurance that GT73 "is as safe as conventional oilseed rape for humans and animals, and in the context of the proposed uses, for the environment." ACAF says it can only draw such conclusion "on receipt of satisfactory data from a further rat-feeding study using 15 per cent oilseed rape meal." Source: Statement by Mr. Elliot Morely, UK Minister for the Environment and Agri-Environment. In: minutes of the UK's European Standing Committee A, Tuesday 2 November 2004.
- (4) Greenpeace wrote several letters to national authorities to get hold of the Monsanto data on GT73. After Greenpeace won a court case allowing it access to Monsanto's confidential data of feeding trials with GM maize in June 2005, it was expected that the data on the feeding trials with GT73 would be made public; but so far the documents have not been published. Contrary to EU law

German officials explicitly refuse access to the data. Greenpeace is awaiting a reaction from the government of the Netherlands, where Monsanto originally filed the data.

- (5) GT73 oilseed rape is made tolerant to the herbicide glyphosate (produced by Monsanto under the brand name "Roundup") by introducing into the plant genetic material extracted from two different bacteria (*Agrobacterium tumefaciens* and *Ochrobactrum anthropi*, and a modified figwort mosaic virus).
- (6) Press release "No to GM Oilseed Rape GT73" published by the Institute of Science in Society on 22 September 2004: <http://www.i-sis.org.uk/NTGMORGT73.php>
- (7) Monsanto's Roundup weedkiller, which contains the chemical glyphosate, is the world's most common agricultural herbicide. It is widely used on Irish farms and may also be used in Coillte's monoculture tree plantations.

Genetically modified "Roundup Ready" crops have been responsible for increased use of the herbicide in recent years. Monsanto's sale of glyphosate has expanded approximately 20% each year through the 1990s, accounting for 67% of the company's total sales as of 2001. More Glyphosate is now being introduced into the environment and the human food chain through cultivation of GMO crops that are tolerant to the herbicide and contain glyphosate residues.

A recent study of Roundup presents new evidence that the glyphosate-based herbicide is far more toxic than the active ingredient alone. The study, published in the June 2005 issue of Environmental Health Perspectives, (Sophie Richard, Safa Moslemi, Herbert Sipahutar, Nora Benachour, and Gilles-Eric Seralini, Environmental Health Perspectives, Vol. 113, No. 6 June 2005, <http://ehp.niehs.nih.gov/members/2005/7728/7728.html> and <http://ga4.org/ct/k71TIKE1WzfS/>) reports glyphosate toxicity to human placental cells within hours of exposure, at levels ten times lower than those found in agricultural use. The researchers also tested glyphosate and Roundup at lower concentrations for effects on sexual hormones, reporting effects at very low levels. This suggests that dilution with other ingredients in Roundup may, in fact, facilitate glyphosate's hormonal impacts.

Roundup is a mixture of glyphosate and other chemicals (commonly referred to as "inerts") designed to increase the herbicide's penetration into the target and its toxic effect. Since inerts are not listed as "active ingredients" the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) does not assess their health or environmental impacts, despite the fact that more than 300 chemicals on EPA's list of pesticide inert ingredients are or were once registered as pesticide active ingredients, and that inert ingredients often account for more than 50% of the pesticide product by volume.

- (8) Report of the Interdepartmental Group on Modern Biotechnology, published by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, October 2000:

"We recommend that independent generic research (not limited to any particular product) be conducted in this country into all aspects of GMOs including human health and safety, animal feed and live crops, and the effects of GMOs on the environment, including wildlife and biodiversity, having regard to our distinctive climate and geological conditions."

- (9) Letter from Dr. Pat O'Mahoney, Chief Biotechnology Specialist, Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI) to Dr. Elizabeth Cullen, Irish Doctors' Environmental Association, 8 August 2005:

"In response to your recent letter, I can inform you that neither the Food Safety Authority of Ireland, nor the European Commission, as far as I am aware, have any immediate plans to implement surveillance activity to identify possible adverse health impacts on the human population from genetically engineered foods."

- (10) Transcript of the Dáil Debate:

<http://www.gmfreeireland.org/downloads/GMO-24november2004.pdf>

- (11) See: http://www.efsa.eu.int/stakeholder_stakeholder_consultative_platform

Ten demands for the reform of the EFSA are supported by the European Public Health Alliance, Eurocoop, the European Environmental Bureau, Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth. The demands can be downloaded from:

http://www.foeeurope.org/publications/2005/EFSA_stakeholders_challenge.pdf

On 6 October 2005 Greenpeace published a new scientific report on the risk assessment by the EFSA of a GM crop made by Swiss-based Syngenta, called Bt11. The Authority gave the green light in May 2005 to the cultivation of this maize, which could become the first GM plant allowed for growing in the EU since 1998. A gene from a soil bacteria was introduced in the maize genome to make it produce an insecticidal toxin. The new Greenpeace report shows that no serious investigation was conducted on the toxicity of this GM maize or its impact on the environment, such as detrimental effects on useful or protected insect species. Furthermore, already published scientific results on possible negative environmental consequences of this GM maize were widely ignored by EFSA. The report can be downloaded at:

<http://eu.greenpeace.org/downloads/gmo/Bt11reportOct05.pdf>

In November 2004 Friends of the Earth published "Throwing caution to the wind", a detailed critique of the EFSA and its work on GM foods. The report can be downloaded here:

<http://www.foeeurope.org/GMOs/publications/EFSAreport.pdf>

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON GT73

A full transcript of the Irish Parliamentary debate of 24 November 2004 on Monsanto's GT73:

www.gmfreeireland.org/downloads/GMO-24november2004.pdf

The GM-free Ireland Network Briefing paper submitted for the Irish Parliamentary debate on 24 November 2004:

www.gmfreeireland.org/resources/briefings/GMFIbriefing1.pdf

Comprehensive fact sheet on GT73:

www.saveourseeds.org/dossier/fact_sheet_GT73.htm

European Commission press release announcing the legalisation of GT73:

www.gmfreeireland.org/news/index.php#EUGT73

UK Defra summary of concerns on GT73 (July 2004):

www.defra.gov.uk/environment/acre/advice/pdf/acre_advice36.pdf

The official UK government advisors on GM foods and feeds – ACRE and ACAF – have said that they are not satisfied with the explanation that Monsanto has provided for the observed increased liver weight in rats fed GT73. They are not convinced by EFSA's assurance that GT73 "is as safe as conventional oilseed rape for humans and animals, and in the context of the proposed uses, for the environment." ACAF says it can only draw such conclusion "on receipt of satisfactory data from a further rat-feeding study using 15 per cent oilseed rape meal." Source: Statement by Mr. Elliot Morely, UK Minister for the Environment and Agri-Environment. In: minutes of the UK's European Standing Committee A, Tuesday 2 November 2004.

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Reports on spread of GM oilseed rape in Japanese ports as result of spilled imports:

www.saveourseeds.org/downloads/oilseed_rape_in_japanese_ports_2005.pdf

Austrian Office for the Environment (UBA):

Risk Assessment of GMO products in the EU –

Detailed analysis of toxicity assessment, allergenicity assessment and substantial equivalence in practice (July 2004):

www.umweltbundesamt.at/fileadmin/site/publikationen/BE253.pdf

Institute for Science in Society: No to GM Oilseed Rape GT73 (September 2004)

Description of GT73 and why it should be rejected by Prof. Joe Cummins, Dr. Mae-Wan Ho and Lim Li Ching:

www.i-sis.org.uk/NTGMORGT73.php

Greenpeace critique of EFSA opinion on GT73:

Greenpeace technical critique of EFSA Opinion on Monsanto's Roundup Ready Oilseed Rape, GT73i which you can download from

www.gmfreeireland.org/coexistence/GPTechCritiqueOfEFSAOpinion.pdf

Friends of the Earth critique of EFSA opinion on GT73:

letter to the UK Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural affairs on 11 June 2004.

Details may be found on page 10 of the Forging a GM Policy for Ireland briefing to the Irish Parliament on 24 November 2004, which you can download from

www.gmfreeireland.org/resources/briefings/GMFIbriefing1.pdf