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**EU Environment Ministers Keep Bans on Transgenic Maize**

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**BRUSSELS, Belgium**, March 2, 2009 (ENS) - European Union environment ministers today overwhelmingly rejected a European Commission proposal to force Austria and Hungary to lift their bans on the controversial cultivation of varieties of genetically modified maize, or corn.

The first Environment Council under the Czech Presidency was asked to decide on three commission proposals for repealing safeguard clauses by Austria and Hungary on the cultivation of two genetically modified varieties of maize.

Twenty-two of the EU's 27 member states voted to allow Hungary to maintain a ban on Monsanto's GM maize, MON810, and Austria to keep its ban on MON810 and Bayer's T25.

Sold under the trade name Yieldgard, MON810 confers resistance to European corn borer, an insect pest.

Bayer CropScience's modified maize T25 is engineered to tolerate the pesticide glufosinate. Glufosinate was included in a biocide ban proposed by the Swedish Chemicals Agency and approved by the European Parliament on January 13, 2009.



**Field of Monsanto's GM maize, MON810** (Photo by WJAC)

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Commenting on the decision, Green MEP Caroline Lucas said, "Today's decision by EU environment ministers is great news for the environment, farmers and consumers - and sets a good precedent for future campaigns against genetically modified crops."

The Green Party Member of the European Parliament representing the South-East of England said, "For the many regions in the EU that have expressed doubts over GM technology, today's vote shows that it is still possible to be GM-free."

After the end of the EU moratorium on the approval of GM plants, the European Commission began to fight such bans in 2005. The EU environmental ministers, however, have rejected all proposals to lift the prohibitions.

"This is the fourth time EU governments have rejected a commission proposal to force member states to act against the will of their citizens and to allow the cultivation of GM crops," said Lucas. "It is deeply disturbing that the commission continues to try and bulldoze through its pro-GM agenda in spite of public opposition."

In February 2007, the Council of Environment Ministers rejected a commission proposal to repeal Hungary's safeguard clause on this GM maize. Hungary then submitted four studies on the effects of MON810 on the environment which the Commission asked the European Food Safety Authority to assess.

In July 2008, European Food Safety Authority concluded that the studies contained no new data that would justify prohibiting cultivation of MON810 in Hungary.

The Commission therefore resubmitted its proposal to the council for decision. Hungary has since circulated a letter referring to a series of studies that indicate adverse effects of MON810 on the environment in Hungary which it believes justify maintaining the safeguard measure.

Hungary is one of Europe's biggest grain producers. In January 2005, it was the first country in eastern Europe to prohibit the genetically modified maize MON 810, following similar bans on EU-approved GM crops in Austria, France, Germany, Greece and Luxembourg during the years 1995 to 2000.

In December 2006, the Environment Council rejected a commission proposal to repeal Austria's safeguard clause on the cultivation of GM maizes MON810 and T25.

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In November 2007 Austria submitted new evidence to support its safeguard measures on cultivation which the commission asked European Food Safety Authority to assess.

The Food Safety Authority concluded in December 2008 that "the scientific evidence currently available does not sustain the arguments provided by Austria" and that "cultivation of maize MON810 and T25 is unlikely to have an adverse effect on human and animal health and the environment in Austria."

On this basis, the commission submitted to the Environment Council two separate proposals for decisions to repeal the safeguard clause applying to each type of maize.

More votes are yet to come in the Environment Council concerning the bans on GM crops in France and Greece.

Public opinion does not support the cultivation of transgenic crops in Hungary, Austria, France or Greece.

According to a Eurobarometer survey of March 2008, in Hungary 70 percent of respondents were against genetically modified organisms; in Austria, 62 percent were opposed; in France 70 percent were opposed, and in Greece 77 percent of respondents said they were against GMOs.

"We hope environment ministers will again step up to the plate," said Lucas. "However, what we really need is a clearly defined European policy on GMOs. This must start with an overhaul of the risk assessment procedure for GM crops, as requested unanimously by all 27 member states in December 2008."

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