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Global Agricultural Information Network

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Report Highlights:

This report describes the trade and production of genetically engineered (GE) plant products, the use of GE animals for research purposes, and related government policies in Belgium and Luxembourg. An EU-wide overview is provided by the EU Consolidated Biotechnology Annual drafted by FAS Paris.

Executive Summary

The Flemish regional government and agricultural sector have a pragmatic approach towards the import and use of genetically engineered (GE) agricultural products, while the Walloon government and agricultural sector have a more negative approach towards agricultural biotechnology. In both Belgian Regions, however, crop trials and commercial cultivation of biotech crops are hindered by cumbersome regulations and by the threat of protests from environmental groups. The Flemish livestock sector depends on feed imports from third countries, mainly soybean meal, which for a major part is GE. The Belgian livestock sector does not keep GE animals nor do agricultural research institutes keep them for research purposes.

Plant Biotechnology Trade and Production

In Belgium, there are no commercial plantings of biotech crops and no biotech crops under development that will be on the market in the coming year. A large share of the Belgian agricultural imports from the United States consists of feed products and requires labeling for biotech content under the European Union's traceability and labeling legislation. The slow approval process of new GE events by the European Union has significantly affected U.S. exports to the Benelux region in particular corn gluten feed (CGF) and Distillers Dried Grains (DDG).

Plant Biotechnology Policy

As EU member state, Belgium has implemented harmonized legislation regarding agricultural biotechnology. The following authorities are responsible for implementation and enforcement of the regulatory framework for agricultural biotechnology:

The Federal Cabinets. An important part of the decision-making power lay in the Cabinets, which directly advise the Federal Ministers.

The Federal Government Department for Health, Food Chain Safety and Environment (VVL). The VVL is the coordinating Belgian Federal Government Department in the policy-making process in the field of medical and agricultural biotechnology. The VVL is responsible for the enforcement of legislation regarding feed trials in co-decision with the Department of Environment and Infrastructure of the Flemish Government and the General Directorate of Natural Resources and Environment of the Walloon Government.

The Biosafety Advisory Council (ARB) and the Service of Biosafety and Biotechnology (SBB). The ARB and SBB advise the VVL about the safety of activities involving GE animals and plants.

The Belgian Food Agency (FAVV). The FAVV is responsible for document and physical controls of food and feed. The FAVV implements and enforces the EU traceability and labeling legislation.

In Belgium, one field trial was conducted with genetically engineered (GE) poplars and one experiment with GE potatoes (late blight resistant) in 2011. The poplar variety is developed for the purpose of bioethanol production. In 2012, the trials with the poplars and potatoes are expected to be prolonged. For the 2012 season, the Belgian Government also approved a trial with GE corn with increased energy content. Experimental planting of biotech crops is almost impossible in Belgium. Crop trials are hindered by cumbersome regulations imposed by the government and by the threat of protests from environmental groups.

The two Belgian Regions, Flanders and Wallonia, are responsible for formulating and implementing coexistence policies. In March 2007, the Flemish Government decided upon a framework for the coexistence regulations, which was enforced in May 2009. The regulations reportedly guarantee free choice for the farmer to plant GE crops, and include a liability fund. In February 2006, the Walloon Government approved coexistence regulations, which were enforced in August 2008. According to the Walloon Government, the regulations on cultivating GE crops are as restrictive as possible within the scope of the harmonized EU regulations. The regulations contain possibilities to impose “biotech free” zones, and a liability fund paid by the farmer planting GE crops. Sector sources believe that the combination of restrictions will practically ban the cultivation of GE crops in Wallonia. The approach of the Luxembourg Government towards the use and cultivation of biotech crops is at least as restrictive as the regulations imposed by the Walloon Government. The Luxembourg Government banned the EU approved GE corn events Syngenta Bt176 and Monsanto MON 810 for commercial cultivation.

When deciding on a position on a GE plant variety, the Federal Belgian Government studies the EFSA opinion on the variety, the advice of the ARB and the SBB, and other risk management criteria’s such as the availability of reference materials and detection methods, and the quality of monitoring. When the advice of the ARB is not in line with the EFSA opinion, the Federal Belgian Government starts bilateral discussions with EFSA in order to resolve the diverging issues. But when the issues cannot be solved, the Belgian Government may decide to vote against or to abstain on the particular GE event. When the EFSA opinion is positive and the advice of the ARB is in line with it, the Belgian Government may decide to vote in favor of the particular GMO if the other risk management criteria’s are fulfilled.

The Federal Belgian Government supported the EC legislation for a tolerance for a Low Level Presence (LLP) of unapproved GE varieties in feed, but will likely be unwilling to support it for food. The federal authorities explained that even gaining support for LLP in feed was difficult as the Wallonia opposed and Flanders supported it. In the end, the federal authorities made the decision as it was within their competence, and they found that there was no food safety issue.

Plant Biotechnology Marketing Issues

The Belgian Farmers Organization (Boerenbond) is pragmatic and in favor of planting biotech crops, but has also the position that biological material protected by patent rights should be freely available for the development of new varieties. The Boerenbond furthermore points to the resistance of retailers and consumers towards food

products containing biotech components, in particular in export markets such as Germany. The Belgian livestock sector depends on feed imports from third countries, mainly soybean meal, which for a major part is GE. There is no resistance by consumers as this meat produced with biotech feed does not have to be labeled.

Plant Biotechnology Capacity Building and Outreach

FAS The Hague has identified the following strategy for plant biotechnology capacity building and outreach:

- Maintain contact with host country livestock producers on the problem of feed availability. Serve as a ready source of unbiased, scientific information.
- Promote with host government rational policies concerning adventitious presence of non-approved GE events and the acceptability of meat and dairy products from animals fed with GE feeds.
- Nominate appropriate host country specialists for the International Visitors Program, and utilize other Public Diplomacy programs.
- Work to get U.S. specialists invited to seminars in host countries. FAS The Hague feels that U.S. farmers, producer groups, academics and scientists, are most qualified to objectively address their views on biotech in crop production and will be listened to by the press and consumers. Arguments by these groups are more difficult for anti-biotech groups to counter.

Animal Biotechnology

In Belgium, there are no GE animals used for commercial use. GE animals are authorized for use as laboratory animal for medical research at universities and academic hospitals. The federal government has a joint responsibility with the two Belgian Regions, Flanders and Wallonia, for authorization of the use of GE animals. The Service of Biosafety and Biotechnology has a coordinating role and advises the government about the safety of using GE animals.