

EU agrees opt-out deal for GMO imports

BRUSSELS: The EU announced plans Wednesday to simplify the import approval process for controversial genetically modified foods and animal feed, allowing member states to decide whether to admit them or not...



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The move mirrors an earlier compromise accord approved by the European Parliament in January which gave the 28 EU countries the right to decide whether or not to cultivate genetically modified organisms (GMOs).

After years of bitter dispute, the opt-out provision means that those countries such as Spain which already grow GMOs and want more will no longer be stymied by opponents such as France.

It also helps resolve a delicate political problem for the European Commission since if a GMO is judged safe for human consumption by the European Food Safety Agency, then it has no option but to agree that it can be grown or imported without restriction in the EU single market.

Member states opposed to GMOs will now be able to cite grounds outside health and safety, such as social or environmental impact, for banning them without embroiling the Commission, the EU's executive arm, in a political stand-off which holds up the whole process.

The compromise was initially welcomed as breaking up the GMO logjam but environmental groups say that in practice it lets GMOs into the EU via the back door at the behest of giant US agri-food companies just as the bloc is negotiating a massive free trade accord with Washington.

On the other side, industry groups say the accord breaches the EU's cardinal rule that the bloc constitutes a single market where products are supposed to circulate freely.

"It will seriously threaten the internal market for food and feed products, causing substantial job losses and lower investment in the agri-food chain in opt-out countries. This would cause serious distortions of competition for all EU agri-food chain partners," said Copa-Cogeca, the top farm lobby.

Only one GMO is currently allowed to be cultivated in the EU - US multinational Monsanto's brand of corn GMO MON810 that is grown in Spain, Portugal and the Czech Republic.

Some 58 GMO products have been cleared for import into the EU, mainly for cattle feed.

The import accord now goes to the European Parliament for further discussion before it is submitted to member states for final approval.

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