

EU to decide on the import of new genetically engineered soybeans

Plants are resistant to a cocktail of herbicides known to be hazardous to human health

7 July 2017 / Important votes are scheduled to be taken mid-July in Brussels on EU imports of new genetically engineered soybeans. The soybean plants produced by Bayer and Dow AgroSciences are engineered to be resistant to the application of several herbicides. Consequently, the soybean harvest will be burdened with the respective residues. Nonetheless, the European Food Safety Authority EFSA has only partially assessed the residues of the herbicides and did not take combinatorial effects into account. According to the data available, consumption of the soybeans are likely to pose health risks. For this reason Testbiotech is warning against allowing these imports.

Member States of the EU are scheduled to vote on 12 and 17 July in Brussels. Testbiotech is urging them to reject the application. “Genetic engineering makes it possible to spray a cocktail of toxic substances onto the soybeans. These herbicides are suspected of being cancerogenic, or classified as being toxic to the reproductive system,” says Christoph Then for Testbiotech. „The herbicides are known to leave residues in the harvest and these need to be assessed in detail. But, according to the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA), the data submitted by industry are not sufficient to assess the health risks. Under these circumstances, political decision makers need to become much more proactive in protecting human health and the environment.”

The pending applications concern three soybean events that have been made resistant to two or three herbicides:

- Glyphosate – which the international expert group IARC has classified as being possibly cancerogenic;
- Glufosinate – which is classified as being toxic for the reproductive system and is supposed to be removed from the market by end July 2018;
- Isoxaflutole – which is suspected by EFSA of causing cancer in humans;
- 2,4-D - which, according to recent publications, is suspected of giving rise to cancerogenic metabolites in the plants.

In the US, Brazil and Argentina, where the genetically engineered soybeans are cultivated, further additives are mixed into the herbicide formulations. It is known that some these additives show a higher toxicity than the single substances and are therefore no longer allowed in the EU.

Testbiotech is seeing increasing political support: in a recent letter to Testbiotech, the German Minister for the Environment, Barbara Hendricks backed demands to raise standards in the risk assessment of genetically engineered plants, and where there is uncertainty to reject the market applications.

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Further information:

Background on genetic engineering and glyphosate resistant plants:

www.testbiotech.org/en/gendatenbank_basics

Testbiotech comments on the three applications for GE soybeans: www.testbiotech.org/node/2029

The letter from the German Minister for the Environment:

www.testbiotech.org/sites/default/files/2017-06-23_Antwort-Barbara-Hendricks_Juni_2017s.pdf