Media release

Legal dossier: Cultivation of genetically engineered maize in the EU has to be suspended

Companies have failed to file fully completed applications

7 December 2016 / According to a recent legal dossier, the pending applications for the cultivation of genetically engineered maize in the EU suffer from crucial deficiencies. In consequence, the pending applications must be rejected and the existing authorisation for cultivation of maize MON810 withdrawn. The applications were filed by Monsanto, Pioneer/DuPont and Syngenta. They have wholly ignored recent developments and failed to properly address the risk of the transgenes spreading to other plant species.

These latest problems have emerged in connection with the spontaneous occurrence of a plant species known as teosinte. Teosinte is spreading in maize fields in Spain, the country where the most genetically engineered plants are grown in the EU. Teosinte is a plant species that can hybridize with maize and produce viable offspring. Thereby, also the transgenes can be transferred from maize into teosinte populations.

EU regulations require the assessment of gene flow from genetically engineered plants to other plant species that can interbreed. This is an issue considered to be crucial for risk assessment, since hybridisation may lead to the uncontrolled spread of the transgenes and severely impact farmers and the environment. In the applications, filed by the companies several years ago, gene flow to wild plant species is explicitly excluded. For example, Pioneer/ DuPont writes in its application: "*Teosinte is an ancient wild grass found in Mexico and Guatemala and is not present in the EU.*"

However, it has been known since at least 2009 that teosinte is growing in maize fields in Spain. According to the legal dossier, the companies had an obligation to file this "new information" to the EU authorities, accompanied by a detailed risk assessment. But none of the companies did as required. Instead, Monsanto, for example, only recently said that the occurrence of teosinte should not be considered at all.

"This is a problem caused by companies simply ignoring the issue. It means that the current process of authorisation has to be restarted and the cultivation of MON810 has to be suspended," says Christoph Then for Testbiotech, "If the EU Commission proceeds on the basis of the current applications, this would not only create substantial environmental risks, but also severely damage trust in the regulatory system of the EU."

Teosinte has already spread over several hundred hectares in Spain causing substantial economic harm. Currently, it is not known which subspecies of teosinte are present in the fields. Unless this issue is resolved the actual risk of gene flow and transgenic spread cannot be assessed. Therefore, more detailed investigations are needed. If gene flow from transgenic maize occurs, teosinte might produce insecticidal toxins or show other unexpected characteristics.

The dossier was commissioned by Testbiotech. It was drawn up by Professor Ludwig Kraemer, who is regarded as one of the most experienced experts in environmental law and EU policy. According to his legal dossier, the problems concern three genetically maize variants that produce insecticidal toxins (MON810, Bt 11 and Maize 1507) as well as the application for a maize variant engineered to be resistant to glyphosate (GA21). The EU Commission and the experts of Member States want to discuss the pending applications on 9 December in Brussels. A vote is scheduled for 17 January 2017.

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Further information:

The legal dossier of Professor Ludwig Kraemer: www.testbiotech.org/node/1773

Testbiotech backgrounder on risks of genetically engineered maize: www.testbiotech.org/node/1759