EUROPEAN CONFERENCE

CO-EXISTENCE OF GENETICALLY MODIFIED, CONVENTIONAL AND ORGANIC CROPS
FREEDOM OF CHOICE

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SUSANNA CENNI
TUSCANY Minister for Agriculture,
member of the ASSEMBLY OF EUROPEAN REGIONS
on behalf of
"GMO-FREE" EUROPEAN REGIONS AND LOCAL AUTHORITIES' NETWORK[1]

AGRICULTURE, BIODIVERSITY AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT AT REGIONAL LEVEL. WHICH COEXISTENCE ?

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[1] Aquitaine, Abruzzo, Basse Normandie, Bolzano, Bourgogne, Bretagne, Burgenland, Centre, Drama-Kavala-Xanthi, Emilia-Romagna, ENAE (Union of Prefecture Authorities of Greece), Euskadi, Franche-Comté, Haute Normandie, Highlands of Scotland, Käernten, Ile de France, Lazio, Liguria, Limousin, Marche, Menorca, Midi-Pyrénées, Molise, Niederösterreich, Nord Pas de Calais, Oberösterreich, Pays de la Loir, Piemonte, Poitou-Charentes, Principado de Asturias, Rhônes-Alpes, Salzburg, Sardegna, Steiermark, Tirol, Toscana, Umbria, Wales, Wien.

Introduction

Before I begin my contribution to this Conference, I'd like to thank the European Commission and the Austrian Presidency of the European Union for organizing this important event.

I am also grateful to the organisers for giving us the opportunity to put our point of view on the crucial subject of managing the introduction of GMOs into European Countries without compromising the principle of choice: or so called "*coexistence*".

Today, I'm here on behalf of forty European Regions and Local Authorities that constitute a wider European Network known as the *GMO-free European Regions and Local Authorities' Network.*

I'm here also to present the partnership between the Network and the Assembly of European Regions, who is also involved in this subject and particularly with the protection of high quality agriculture and certified origin products.

The Network I represent was born in November 2003 out of a joint initiative by the Tuscany and Upper Austria Regions who gathered together a total of ten Regions for the first meeting. This networking was a response to developments of the GMO legal framework during 2003, including the issue of the 2003 Recommendation on coexistence. Our unifying need was, and remains, the protection of our rural economies in the face of serious concern surrounding the introduction of this new technology to the European agricultural production system.

The following year saw two other important milestones for the Network: the Linz Conference and a joint declaration of intent on the subject of coexistence from Tuscany and Upper Austria Ministers for agriculture.

The next major development was in February 2005 when twenty Regions signed the what has become known as the "*Charter of Florence*". This document, focused on the subject of coexistence, is the main paper that underpins the Network and contains ten points on which our common actions are based.

At the end of November 2005 the fourth Conference of the Network took place in Rennes, allowing the Network to define its primary objectives and formalise the adhesion of new Regions to make a present total of forty members.

Chapter 1 – Regional diversity and strategy in Agriculture

Our work in this area has helped us define common principles and strategies to defend and promote a sustainable agriculture respectful of the environment on our territories. Member Regions face the same issues and can apply the same solutions to problems like conserving rural identity, maintaining the competitiveness of agricultural products and preserving biodiversity by means of clear rules to govern the introduction of GMOs. These challenges can only be addressed through the right to maintain large GMO-free areas (equivalent to a Region).

Given current scientific knowledge about long term impact of releasing GM crops, it seems fair to say that GMOs remain an unknown quantity and represent a novel product that must be strictly managed in order to preserve our regional, national and also European peculiarities.

Permitting individual farmers to choose if GM crops should be introduced to an area and excluding a Local or Regional strategy, sounds like a dive in the unknown and may have irreversible consequences.

The issue of GM safety, as relevant research and studies have shown, is not as clear cut as it should be to command public confidence. Last month, during a Conference in Rome, Italian integrated public research on the subject of GMOs showed that there is a lack of information and guidelines in the field of impact studies.

The GM authorisation process also fails to take account of the economic, social and cultural aspect of releasing GM crops into the food production chain, an opinion that is supported within the scientific community and by a majority of Member States.

It is obvious to any casual observer of the GM debate that consumers aren’t ready to embrace this controversial form of production, this fact was clearly shown in the last Eurobarometer survey and has been demonstrated in several other surveys all around the

world. Also in the USA, and in other countries where GMOs seem to be accepted, there appears to be a change of direction and an increasing demand of transparency.

In Europe, some food processing industries have already demonstrated that it is possible to avoid using GMOs in the production chain. These developments are simply indicators of market conditions.

All over Europe there are stakeholders and citizens that claim the right to have a non-GM agriculture and want this right recognized.

Several regions and Local Authorities have based, regarding GMOs, their agriculture policies on the protection of their uniquely identifiable regional products, which indicate quality and command consumer loyalty. This is the case for Tuscany and also for majority of the other Regions of the Network.

Chapter 2 –Coexistence at regional scale

Turning to Coexistence at a regional scale, the Network, taking into account the perspective of European Regions and Local Authorities, wants the opportunity to stay GMO-free. This perspective is essential because we are best placed in the pyramid of decision making to be an effective interface between local stakeholders and National and European Institutions.

One of the working groups set up within the Network, and coordinated by the Aquitaine Region, has defined some rules to be considered in applying coexistence legislation at the regional level.

The group identified the need to recognise Regions and Local Authorities as the "*appropriate scale*" to implement coexistence as the key principle.

In fact, taking into account the average size of European farms, coexistence rules would seem unworkable and inapplicable at farm level.

The recent publication from Joint Research Centre has also shown that it is possible only in the case of clustered and separated crops to maintain contamination control in the production chain over time.

Some of the network's views on coexistence follow on from the statements contained in the Commission Recommendation, and attempt to apply them in a practical situation.

Firstly, we believe it's necessary to completely separate the GM production chain from non-GM production chain and to implement a traceability mechanism for GM plants and animals.

We want to ensure the transparency of GM process industry and thus to protect the non-GM one.

To do so, we propose to define particular areas where cultivation and breeding of GMOs will be forbidden, like districts with organic farming, natural protected areas, areas of certified origin products, and so on.

Taking this approach would also require us to identify prevention measures (such as buffer zones, isolation distances, good agriculture practices, etc.) in order to avoid contamination of conventional and organic agricultures by GMOs.

Clearly, given this approach it would be necessary to oblige the farmers who cultivate or breed GMOs to notify their Local or Regional Authorities.

This is not a double authorization. The authorization for commercial release doesn't take into account local aspects and, furthermore, it's necessary for Regional and Local Authorities to know where GMOs are used in order to permit the proper management of our territories.

We also consider it necessary to institute monitoring at Local or Regional levels and control systems for the GM plants and animals based on available technologies. In this case the assistance of European Commission seems fundamental.

Climatic and weather conditions in specific areas are other important issues to be considered when defining specific standards to avoid any uncontrolled dissemination of GMOs. Extreme weather conditions could scatter reproductive material and pollen over long distances.

Placing a duty on Farmers is another key way to preserve non-GM zones from GM contamination.

From this perspective it seems necessary to implement appropriate training for farmers who want to cultivate or breed GM organisms.

Those farmers should be obliged to hold and update farm registers which can be made available to competent authorities. Maintaining a list of workers and an inventory of machines and other relevant technical equipment involved along the GMO production chain should also be a requirement. These measures should also apply to contractors.

Clearly, the obligations and duties linked to the farm in which GMOs are used must be followed in the case of a change of ownership.

As a last point, it's necessary to institute a mandatory system of suitable sanctions and compensation based on the "*polluter-pays*" principle, covering all the costs incurred, direct and indirect. This is a basic requirement which must be facilitated by the GMO industry to ensure the coexistence between GMO, conventional and organic agricultures.

We would expect a new strategy from the European Commission, defining the implementation of "sustainable coexistence" measures at Local or Regional level, taking into account:

a) the "*precautionary principle*";

b) the technical parameters necessary to preserve biodiversity;

c) transparency and traceability in the GMO production chain and GMO process industry;

d) liabilities, sanctions and compensation, in case of contamination of non-GM zones or products by GMOs, based on the "*polluter-pays*" principle;

e) tolerance threshold in seed equivalent to "*technical zero*".

We would also expect this strategy to be compatible with current European programmes for sustainable rural development and environmental conservation.

GMO contamination in conventional or organic crops is another critical point in the development of coexistence proposals. We think that the 0,9% threshold doesn't represent what is technically achievable for crops or seeds, because this is an arbitrary threshold, which is not developed from good agricultural practices. Every crop needs a unique

separation distance to minimise contamination and this parameter could be different from a Region to an other one.

If we could reduce the potential for contamination with a greater separation distance, why should we adopt a distance that permits contamination at the 0,9% level? If a lower threshold can be achieved with a bigger separation distance, why do we have to use a pejorative standard?

From our perspective a contamination threshold equal to "*technical zero*" (that is the limit of detection) would be the best solution to ensuring protection, particularly in seed production and organic farming.

Chapter 3 – Future initiatives

As you can see from my earlier comments we in the network want an effective European framework for coexistence that affords the best protection to our respective territories, not only in the regional market, but also in the global market. Allowing individual farmers the unrestricted ability to introduce GM crops will disrupt our rural development ambitions if it is not properly reconciled with local strategies. Observing local strategies will permit coexistence at European and national level, and comply with WTO agreements.

The Network is working in this direction. We are planning our next initiatives.

Today, I can announce that we are working in partnership with the Assembly of European Regions to cooperate on a series of events. These common actions should operate on:

- exploring the international market in GMO-free soy for feeding stuff;
- research on the socio-economic impact of GMOs at the regional level;
- marketing of high quality regional produce.

It's an ambitious programme but it's the only way to demonstrate our commitment to maintaining real freedom of choice at regional level.

Conclusion

Overall, I am here as a representative of the network to ask the Commission for specific resources for regional activities and programmes, like those conducted by our Network.

We are asking for a holistic approach to coexistence and we agree with the Report of the Commission where it affirms that variability may have an impact on the cost-effectiveness of segregation measures, which may need to be adapted to suit local conditions.

We are ready to open an institutional dialogue to implement gradually a sustainable coexistence in Europe.

In this view we also request that more research is undertaken under the 7th Framework Research Programme both in the field of biological risk and socio-economic impact at the local level of GMOs on organic farming and quality agriculture.

We want these studies conducted at the Regional scale to consider the differences in the European territories.

We want to limit the possibility of mistakes that could reduce the choice for future generations.

We want freedom of choice at community level.

Thank you for your attention.

Susanna CENNI