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EU Environment Committee votes in favour of an evidence-based regulation of plants derived from new genomic techniques

At its meeting on 24 January 2024, the European Parliament's Environment Committee (ENVI) voted in favour of evidence-based regulation of plants derived from new genomic techniques (NGT) by a clear majority of 47 to 31 with 4 abstentions. This decision further paves the way for the implementation of the Commission's proposal. However, all the obstacles have not yet been overcome. The decisive factor will now be the vote in the EU Parliament and the decision in the Council of Ministers so that negotiations between the Parliament, Member states and the Commission (trilogue procedure) can begin.

Obviously, most parliamentarians followed the arguments from the scientific community and were less influenced by the criticisms of opponents of genetic engineering or organizations in the organic sector. They may also have been surprised by the intensity with which scientists have argued in favour of a science-based implementation of regulation for plants bred using NGTs. For the first time, science has raised its voice and campaigned to preserve Europe as a scientific centre for plant breeding.

The parliamentarians agreed to the introduction of two categories of NGT plants and followed the Commission's proposal that NGT-1 plants should be regarded as equivalent to conventionally bred plants. NGT-2 plants, however, are to be largely regulated under existing genetic engineering legislation.

As it stands today, after the approval of the category of NGT-1 plants that actually fulfil the criteria in Annex 1, these plants are removed from the restrictive requirements of existing genetic engineering law. This means that they are no longer subject to GMO-specific labelling and traceability or comprehensive risk assessment. However, NGT-1 plants are not placed on the market uncontrolled. They are subject, on the one hand, to the provisions of seed law and, on the other hand, to a notification procedure. This notification procedure provides for a type of risk assessment and the creation of a register for NGT-1 plants. With the entry in the register, an identity number is also issued for this NGT-1 plant. This will create transparency for consumers and users. To protect GMO-free agriculture, NGT-1 seeds must always be labelled. Coexistence between the different forms of cultivation and farming is therefore possible. These NGT-1 plants cannot be used in organic agriculture like non-exempted genetically modified plants. As mentioned in the amendments of the ENVI and AGRI committees, it is proposed that NGT-1 plants are not patentable.

The Wissenschaftskreis Genomik und Gentechnik (WGG) and the Association Française des Biotechnologies Végétales (AFBV) welcome the decision of the EU ENVI Committee. They are convinced that this is a step in the right direction toward more sustainable agriculture and food production. Results from European research institutions on NGT applications will thus also be translated into practical applications at European level and will no longer only be exported abroad.

An open letter from AFBV, EU-SAGE (European Sustainable Agriculture Through Genome Editing), WGG to the members of the EU Environment Committee is available here: <https://www.biotechnologies-vegetales.com/open-letter-to-the-european-parliament/>

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