
Major data gaps in risk assessment of genetically engineered soybeans

Discussion amongst experts from EU member states in Brussels
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Munich/Brussels

Today experts from EU Member States will meet in Brussels to discuss two applications for marketing genetically engineered soybeans developed by Monsanto and Bayer. Both kinds of soybean have been engineered to be tolerant to herbicides, so that they can be sprayed directly with glyphosate (known as Roundup) or glufosinate (known as Liberty or Basta) without being damaged. As a consequence, residues from the herbicide absorbed by the plant tissues remain in the plants. The marketing applications cover import and use in food and feed. Testbiotech and NABU, German partner of BirdLife are warning against market authorisation of these products. There are hardly any data available on the actual content of spray residues in the plants:

“Glyphosate, in particular, is sprayed on a massive scale because more and more weeds are becoming resistant to it. There is a huge increase in the usage of the relevant herbicides in countries such as Argentina, Brazil and the US, where genetically engineered soybeans are already cultivated. Marketing these products as food and feed in the EU without detailed data on the actual content of toxic residues in the plants is not acceptable”, says Steffi Ober from NABU. “Meanwhile residues from these herbicides can even be found in the blood of consumers.”

The products under discussion are Monsanto’s soybeans 40-3-2 (known as Roundup Ready soy) and Bayer’s soybeans A5547-127 (nicknamed: Bayer’s Basta Beans). Just recently, Brazil allowed cultivation of the Bayer soybeans. For the first time in the EU, they might be used in food and feed. Roundup Ready soy has already been cultivated in Argentina, Brazil and USA for several years, and imported into the EU mostly for animal feed. Its market authorisation has now come up for renewal. It is unclear whether consumption of these soybeans can cause health problems, because there has been no monitoring since its first market authorisation. Although the monitoring of potential impacts on health from genetically engineered plants is required by EU regulations, it was never carried out.

Glyphosate is the most widely used herbicide in the world. New discussions on the risks to human health from herbicides containing glyphosate started again just recently, after scientific publications indicated that they might damage embryonic development. Germany already prohibits usage of some glyphosate formulations in the food chain production.

After 2017, the EU will no longer allow the use of glufosinate because of its known negative effects on health. It would be contradictory to allow genetically engineered plants containing residues from spraying with glufosinate to be marketed in the EU.

Testbiotech and NABU have raised further concerns about the way risk assessment of these genetically engineered plants is carried out by EFSA, the European Food and Safety Authority: “Significant changes in the composition of the plants were not assessed sufficiently. Possible impacts on the human immune system or the reproductive system were not investigated by empirical data. What is missing is an assessment of the interactions between the different plants, which are mixed into food and feed, and their accumulated effects. In conclusion, these products cannot be regarded as safe.”


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