

EUROPABIO HEAD SLAMS CONSTANT BIOTECH LAW REVIEWS

EU Food Law

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The Secretary General of the European bio-industries association EuropaBio, Willy De Greef has hit out at the constant reviews and reworking of EU biotech legislation. Pointing out that he has been involved in the biotech field since the 1980s (and carried out the first field trials in Europe), De Greef noted about the new review that both the European Commission and the current French Council presidency have launched "this is now the fourth fundamental review of European legislation like this."

He went on to say: "One of the things that really worries me now with time is that legislation is set up and it's very politicised, the debate on it is very, very emotional and after the typical long and complex way in which we make law in Europe you come to a new platform of legislation and almost the moment that it enters into force you've got people starting undoing it again.

"There are two elements in legislation and regulation: One, you make the legislation and second, you give the institutions the time to implement it. And we feel that especially on GM foods and GM crops that we've got stuck in a vicious circle of whoever was least satisfied with the last version of legislation just starts the legislative process all over again," he complained.

Notably he warned that constant reviews were "probably not the most productive way in which to create institutions which can implement legislation. It's certainly not a good way to create confidence in both the regulations and the institutions that work with them. If you have to change it all the time, then people are going to say what are they missing all the time?

"I strongly believe that we should let the current regulations work and we should especially let the institutions we've created to implement them do their job as much as possible in a depoliticised way," he stressed.

Added to that De Greef said that Europe should look to what was happening with GM food and GM crops in the rest of the world, "because that is relevant to the questions we are asking here because ostensibly the questions on the table are about concerns on environmental safety and health safety. If that is true then what is happening to those crops elsewhere in the world should be relevant to the debate."

However, De Greef did welcome the new high level group on biotech that Commission president Jose Manuel Barroso has set up. "The mandate is very broad and that allows people to sort of step back for a second and say are we doing this the right way? What could we do better? And our first element of answer to that which we are feeding into the process is well you could start by depoliticising parts of the approval system so that a safety-based approval system actually focuses on the safety of the product."

Nevertheless, EuropaBio did have some concerns about the people with political mandates that some member states had put into the so-called Sherpa group of experts. Yet others had put in "some really top class experts."

Despite this, De Greef acknowledged that "at the end of the day of course, the solution to get out of the gridlock on GM foods in Europe has to be political, because the issue is political. But our proposal for a political solution is to take a step back and to say 'first of all while we were sort of discussing this endlessly, it has moved on in the rest of the world and we learn now from a lot more experience than when this debate erupted 10 years ago."

Another concern was that there were the two parallel processes going on which De Greef found was "probably symptomatic for the way this policy area is addressed." He asked: "Again does this help us to create clarity?"

Current system could work

De Greef argued that the current system would work if allowed to do so. "Some people have put the thought forward that the current legislation is so unwieldy that it cannot work. I firmly believe that it can work, provided that the institutions are allowed to let it work and that every new product that moves through the pipeline is not seen as another battle ground for another political fight. At that moment it cannot work."

The EuropaBio head pointed out that EFSA had given positive opinions to most products approved in the US, "because safety authorities on the two sides of the ocean on the basis of the same file, of the same data, and if they're allowed to use science to come to their conclusions are most of the time going to come to very similar conclusions and in practice that seems to work. It's after the scientific review, the scientific assessment that in Europe we get into very convoluted processes."

He also dismissed criticisms from environmental and other groups that EFSA only takes into account data generated by industry, in particular the firm applying for approval, telling us "that's the way we do safety assessment for all products. It's not different for a new pharmaceutical or for a new Airbus or for a new car. That's the way you do it. The company is required by regulation to answer a number of questions."

De Greef pointed out that the authorities then have to look at whether those questions have been answered. "If they're not satisfied they ask additional questions, some of those are based on the things that so-called independent groups are entering into the system."

Underlining that "our companies are continually answering these sorts of questions" Mr De Greef rejected claims that EFSA does not look at studies by other stakeholders as "simply wrong."

He added that if EFSA is not entirely satisfied with its in house expertise "they have a mandate to pick up the phone and to call any expert from anywhere in the world who they believe would be the best person in the world to answer that particular question."

Insisting that EFSA did indeed do this, Mr De Greef said "a number of people who are systematically opposing GM technology seem to start from the viewpoint that the only acceptable conclusion from an organisation like EFSA would be one that fully endorses their views. That's a bit easy. If the institution doesn't accept as the holy writ whatever you've put to it then the institution must be wrong, or corrupt or whatever. Come on, it's not the way it works."

EFSA, he argued, has been "very, very diligent to my knowledge in addressing concerns that come from the outside, including those that were based on extremely poor science and in some cases on deliberate misinformation." But for De Greef, "it's just that some of the people who ask the questions may not like the answers they get - you get that with science."

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