

'Industry is held hostage by some member states'

By Peter O'Donnell
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New EuropaBio boss wants to improve influence

Some governments 'are undermining EFSA'

The European biotech industry has to improve its performance in influencing EU regulation, according to its trade association's new secretary-general. "We sometimes feel that we are held hostage by some member states," said Willy De Greef, who has just taken over as the head of EuropaBio.

He pinpointed "attempts by some governments to undermine the European Food Safety Authority by systematic rejection of its findings" in the current controversies over genetically modified crops. "Facts are being pushed out of the window in decision-making – which is unworthy of the quality of governance that EU citizens should expect," he lamented.

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New boss Willy De Greef

Regulatory worries

EuropaBio admits to worries that there are now two parallel regulatory review mechanisms under way of the EU's biotech authorisation procedures – one led by European Commission President José Manuel Barroso and another through the French government's presidency of the Council of Ministers.

In industrial biotech, too, where “European companies lead the world on second-generation biofuels”, De Greef highlighted what he sees as significant gaps in the quality of European support. “Factories must now be built to test technological solutions,” he said. But while companies have found it hard to get support in the EU, the Department of Energy in the United States has proved generous in providing funding to build state-of-the-art plants there. “In Europe we still haven't got the policy into action mode,” warned De Greef. “If we get it wrong in biofuels this will put difficulties in the way of bioplastics, specialised materials and everything else.”

Intellectual property rights

The new EuropaBio chief promises greater industry pressure to obtain a simplified route to better intellectual property rights protection. And in the healthcare field it will pursue efforts to remove obstacles to the launch of innovative new medicines. “There is nowhere near a consensus on innovation management or on budgetary matters,” said De Greef.

Success will depend largely on how well the industry deploys its strong arguments, he said. After a long career in biotech companies, he plans to bring company-style efficiencies to what he sees as the more academic style of trade association interaction with the EU authorities. “Industry has a tendency in general to speak only when spoken to,” he said. “So you are mainly speaking to people who are opposed to you, and you are in reactive mode rather than shaping policy.”

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