

MEETING WITH EUROPABIO

'EU 2020 AND BEYOND'

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MUSEE DU CINQUANTENAIRE

SPEECH

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very pleased to be here today to explore with you how the European biotechnology industry can contribute to responsible innovation and deliver benefits to society.

In our resource-constrained world, I am certain that the success and competitiveness of the European biotechnology industry will stem first and foremost from its innovative capacity. The innovative capacity of European industry is impressive in all sectors, be it red, white, green or since recently blue technology.

At the heart of most of these innovations lie the small and medium-sized companies. They are the backbone of our industrial base and they merit our full support to turn their bright ideas into successful products. The applications submitted for the SME award that will be handed over today,

demonstrate the immense innovation potential of European SMEs.

Becoming leaders and staying leaders in this field requires being a first mover. The European industry should step up its efforts to deliver the technologies and products that are being demanded.

This applies to nanotech, GMOs and to other new biotechnologies.

Innovation in nanotechnologies is expected to deliver significant advances across a wide range of domains, including medicines and food, in the years to come.

However, it is important for the nanotech industry to convince citizens of the benefits of these innovative products.

In the GMO field, responsible innovation leading to products with clear perceived benefits for the consumer and society would certainly make a difference.

Drought-resistant or salt-resistant GM crops have been awaited for many years now, along with new GM foods with improved nutritional content or health-promoting qualities. In short – clear, tangible benefits.

A few applications concerning these long-awaited products have been recently submitted for authorisation:

- two GM maize varieties with improved fatty acid profiles;
and
- one drought-tolerant GM maize variety.

Industry should continue to deliver on its promises and prioritise the development of this type of genetic modification.

The same could be said about the replacement of antibiotic-resistant marker genes by other mechanisms. Industry itself should be at the forefront of voluntarily replacing its products by more advanced or better accepted ones.

I welcome the fact that this process is obviously under way. Applications have been recently submitted with the objective of replacing existing GMOs containing these marker genes.

However, this substitution effort should be further reinforced. I am convinced that the potential for unleashing this innovation exists.

The European biotechnology industry has been a leader worldwide, from its research and development capacity to its success in diffusing these innovations globally.

A fundamental question is – How can we create a supporting environment with the conditions for this innovation to actually happen and to capture its potential?

I see three main areas on which we should reflect:

First – from a regulatory point of view, I agree that efforts by industry must be underpinned by a predictable regulatory environment and legal certainty for operators.

Commission services meet regularly with your companies to find out where the legislation may not be working as expected, and to identify possible areas for improvement.

However, it is clear that in this highly contested field, efforts cannot go blindly towards deregulation or simplification.

Whilst industry's efforts for voluntarily raising its standards are necessary, they should go hand in hand with the respect of the most stringent safety and control requirements.

Second, the science behind risk assessment – be it for GMOs, other biotechnologies or nanotech – needs to be made more credible.

Over the last years, the European Union has contributed €200 million addressing primarily the safety for the environment and for animal and human health. Just today, my colleague Moira Geoghegan-Quinn has published a book summarising this research in order to help promote an informed debate.

In fact, only if innovation is safe and is perceived to be safe will it make its way through the whole production chain from farmers, the food industry, final consumers and of course the environment.

Third – and perhaps most importantly – transparency and dialogue with the public. Biotechnology companies should seize the opportunity to facilitate and promote better understanding by the whole of society.

Innovation needs to be in tune with the broad values of society and adequately match the demands of EU citizens.

We have a good example in the medical field with so-called "red biotechnology". The fact that this type of application visibly addresses the needs of consumers has been largely instrumental towards its high-level of public acceptance.

Moreover, transparent and effective communication is paramount.

It is clear that our society will only accept biotechnologies – and in particular their new applications – when their benefits, or potential benefits, are plain for all to see, clearly expressed and readily understandable.

Dialogue with the public is fundamental in this regard. It is also important to address with facts, in a transparent manner, some of the recurrent criticisms around biotechnology and the quality of its products.

This means that GM seeds should be made easily available for researchers to repeat any tests that are part of the risk assessment.

And companies need to improve transparency and access to their data, with a view to improving the image of biotechnology.

So – improving communication on biotechnologies is not only necessary to prioritise the development of traits that are more directly beneficial to the consumer. Citizens' concerns about these technologies also need to be listened to and responded to in an open manner.

I want to see new cutting-edge biotechnology companies that can demonstrate a benefit both for consumers and for users and to be an example of good corporate responsibility.

We need to learn the lessons from past experiences – with GMOs being perhaps the most prominent example – to see how we can build a better partnership between the drivers of new technologies and society at large.

So – to encapsulate in a single sentence – responsible innovation, underpinned by resolute safety, with clear benefits for the consumer and full transparency, marks out the way forward for a successful and harmonious future.

Thank you.

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