

## **Summary of the Ministerial Conference on GMO-free Agriculture: A Chance for Rural Development in Central and South Eastern Europe, Vienna, 10 May 2017**

- Conference background: 20th anniversary of the people's initiative on genetic engineering in Austria, April 1997.
- Goal of the conference: to discuss the opportunities that GMO-free agriculture can create for rural development in Central and South-East Europe to achieve sustainable rural development. Central and South Eastern European countries are major contributors to food safety/security in Europe.
- The conference highlighted successful examples of GMO free agricultural systems, their effects on trade, consumers and regional agricultural production.

### Key points raised:

- Austria's critical attitude towards the use of genetic engineering in agriculture has not changed.
- Hungary and Austria have both raised the ban on GMO cultivation to the status of a constitutional law.
- Other delegations referred also to their restrictive approach towards the cultivation of GMOs.
- The importance of a strong legal framework prohibiting genetic engineering was widely acknowledged.
- The right to self-determination which allows EU Member States to restrict or ban cultivation of GM crops on their territory was a milestone achievement in 2014.
- But it is also very important to have functioning and effective control bodies in place. Even more so since the unintended consequences and long-term effects on flora, fauna and soil, as a result of GMO application in agriculture, especially in open-field cultivation, still remain largely unknown.
- Today we face a window of opportunity to establish a strong regional market for GMO-free food and feed – a unique selling point. We have the chance to install and uphold an image as traditional, natural food production without genetic engineering with special focus on the conservation of eco-systems and natural habitats, protection of nature and biodiversity.

- For example: GMO-free seed production generates high export opportunities. The cultivation of medicinal and aromatic plants or similar niche products provides huge potential and economic opportunities, particularly for small farmers in rural areas.
- Of course the consumer is the decisive factor in GMO application. At the moment consumers demand GMO-free regionally produced food.
- Deep concerns exist over direct and indirect consequences of GMOs on human health and the environment especially when it is nearly impossible to avoid contamination, if one does not control the full chain.
- This makes the food industry a key ally that needs to show solidarity.
- Clear labelling requirements, both as regards GMO seeds as well as feed and foodstuffs and the use of positive labelling for non-GMO foodstuffs will further contribute to gaining the trust of consumers.
- In addition to negative attitudes of consumers towards GMO application in food production, the cultivation of GM crops rarely provide economic advantages or benefits.
- The structure of farming and the tradition of crop cultivation have also a significant impact on the application of genetic engineering.
- A small farm structure makes it much more difficult to ensure the correct use of coexistence provisions or to prevent possible contamination of conventional and organic crops with GM crops. A high share of organic production makes coexistence almost impossible.
- However, one of the great challenges that remain is to secure sufficient supply of non-GMO feed due to the lack of protein feed, especially of soy, where the EU is far from self-sufficient => continue efforts both in mobilising, cultivation of soy as well as in exploring substitutes.

Further examples of positive effects of GMO-free agriculture:

- Rise in organic farming due to growing demand
- GMO-free production helps to address social, environmental and economic issues
- Preservation of biodiversity
- High export opportunities due to GMO-free seed production.
- Avoidance of GMO contamination in honey.
- Cost saving effects for public administration as a result of GMO monitoring because there is no need for costly separation measures.

=> Benefits of the non-use of genetic engineering outweigh potential disadvantages

Overall this conference in general, but also the exchange of views, has shown the importance of the European integration process. It is clear that our common role in Europe is

still of great significance: we work and act according to our shared values and principles in order to create a union of close and dynamic partnerships. Subsequently, all participants could agree to the chairman's conclusions.