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Voluntary Public

Date: 4/11/2014

GAIN Report Number: NL4011

Netherlands

Post: The Hague

Dutch Government Reveals Its Biotech Policy

Report Categories:

Biotechnology - GE Plants and Animals
Biotechnology and Other New Production
Technologies
Cloning
Trade Policy Monitoring

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Report Highlights:

On April 10, the Dutch Cabinet discussed its newly formulated biotech policy with the Dutch Parliament. The Cabinet's policy received general support but the majority of the political parties were mainly interested in the procedures for opting out and restricting further development and application of the technology.

On April 4, the Dutch Cabinet informed the Dutch Parliament of its biotech policy with a 13 page paper. The document defines the standpoint of the Dutch Government towards biotechnology in plant and animal breeding. The paper is a response to five requests of the Parliament on matters mainly related to transparency and procedures of the approval process for genetically modified organisms (GMOs). The paper is presented at a crucial moment as on February 11, 2014, the Dutch Government cast its first negative vote for a biotech dossier at the EU Council. While the Dutch Cabinet opposed this change in position, the decision was the result of a direct instruction from the Parliament (see GAIN Report NL4004). Below is a brief summary of the policy paper and the following discussion with the Parliament on April 10:

General Considerations in the Policy Paper

In the policy paper the Cabinet states that the application of biotechnology in agriculture creates added value and can benefit global food security and sustainability of food production, but only if the risks are negligible. It is acknowledged that a part of society is concerned about the applications of biotechnology in agriculture. The Dutch Cabinet takes these concerns serious. In general they favor biotechnology in plant breeding but oppose it in animals.

Policy for Plant Biotechnology

The Dutch Parliament earlier expressed their concern about the objectivity and transparency of the EFSA (European Food Safety Authority). In the paper the Dutch Cabinet emphasizes their confidence in the quality of the risk assessment of the EFSA. In response to the Parliaments' concerns about the transparency, the Parliament will receive a biannual overview of all genetically modified (GM) crops which are in the pipeline of the approval process and the ones which have already been approved.

In 2004, the Dutch arable crop sector and NGOs formulated the national coexistence regulation, laying down the rules for culture of GM crops. With the abolishment of the Dutch Product Board for Arable Crops, the national coexistence regulation will be transposed to a government regulation as of January 1, 2015. However, in the paper it is stated that in next couple of years the Dutch sector doesn't expect any commercial cultivation of GM crops in the Netherlands. Not noted in the report is that some sector sources even believe that the combination of restrictions will practically ban the cultivation of GM crops in the Netherlands.

The Dutch Cabinet supports the Greek proposal to allow Member States to ban EU approved GMOs for cultivation on their territory. However, the approval for the import of GMOs should be based on a harmonized EU level. The Greek proposal of February 2014 stems from a Dutch initiative in 2010, and a Danish proposal in 2012. The Greek Government plans to reach an agreement at the Environmental Council in June 2014.

The plant breeding sector developed new breeding technologies (NBTs) and the future regulation of these products is uncertain. The Cabinet pressed for clarity about the status of eight NBTs. In line with a request of the Parliament, the Cabinet will advocate for the exemption, including labeling, of cis-genesis. This technique does not pose risks to conventional crops. The freedom of choice is guaranteed

by labeling. Consumers who do not want to consume products which are developed with the use of genetic modification or NBTs, can achieve this by buying organic products. The Dutch Government will support measures which will guarantee the option for the organic sector to exclude the use of cis-genesis.

Policy for Animal Biotechnology

The Cabinet states in the paper that the application of biotechnology in animal breeding for recreation and sport is prohibited, but allowed for biomedical purposes. The Cabinet supports the EU wide ban on animal cloning of farm animals. The Cabinet can accept the EC proposal to ban food from clones, if the regulation is practical and in line with international obligations.

Meeting of the Cabinet with the Parliament

On April 10, the Dutch Parliament discussed the biotech policy of the Cabinet with the Dutch State Secretary of Economic Affairs, Sharon Dijksma, and the State Secretary of Environment, Wilma Mansveld. The following parties were present; GreenLeft (GL), the Party for the Animals (PvdD), the Socialist Party (SP), the Labor Party (PvdA), the Christian Democrats (CDA), the Christian Union (CU) and the Liberal Party (VVD).

The main concern expressed by the political parties, except the VVD, was the seed companies' ability to create a monopoly in the food sector. State Secretary Dijksma responded that if needed patent laws should be changed to assure biological material is freely available for the development of new varieties. The Cabinet's attempt to exclude cis-genesis from harmonized GM legislation was supported by the PvdA, CDA, CU and VVD. The main point of interest appeared to be about the procedures to opt out and ban GM varieties for domestic agriculture. Questions about the approval procedures for import of GMOs were not asked, except about the import of products of animal clones. State Secretary Dijksma stated that the Dutch Government has not made a decision about expanding the prospective EU ban on the products from clones to include products from the prodigy of clones.

The Cabinet's biotech policy can be best described as indecisive, taking distance, and leaving many options open to further restrict the development and application of the technology.