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Parliamentarians discuss future of plant breeding

Report Categories:

Agricultural Situation

Agriculture in the News

Planting Seeds

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Report Highlights:

The future of plant breeding was discussed by a parliamentary advisory council in German parliament on June 1, 2016. Topics were the development of a sustainable breeding strategy for Germany, the market concentration of seed companies, and recent innovations.

General Information:

The future of plant breeding in Germany was discussed at a public hearing of the parliamentary advisory council for sustainable development on June 1, 2016. Members of the German Parliaments consulted experts for their assessments. Besides possible options for a national plant breeding strategy, other topics included the global market concentration of seed producers, technological innovations, as well as the example of the Swiss national plant breeding strategy.

Dr. Carl-Stephan Schäfer of the Federal Association of German Plant Breeders made the general assessment that German plant breeding is well positioned in international competition. He explained that German plant breeding companies have invested in research and development, creating jobs and expanding exports. Nevertheless, the world's plant breeding sector has been subject to structural change for some years. Private plant breeding in Germany is today characterized by predominantly small and medium-sized enterprises.

Schäfer explained that general conditions for plant breeding nevertheless need to be improved further to ensure the sustainability of plant breeding companies in Germany. Thus, access to plant genetic resources must not be hindered. Systems that ensure access need to be strengthened, such as the International Treaty of the FAO.

The plant breeders share the view of different expert committees set up by the EU and the Member States, that the application of the majority of new breeding methods are not covered by current legislation on genetic engineering. In principle, a variety that has been developed using gene editing methods should not be regulated differently if it could have also emerged naturally or using long-recognized classical breeding methods. Conversely, unjustified requirements could hinder the application of more advanced breeding methods. According to Schäfer, other aspects that would improve conditions for plant breeding include better intellectual property rights for variety protection and reproduction.

Christoph Then of Testbiotech (an institute for independent impact assessment in biotechnology), warned against any further concentration in the market for seed producers. He explained the threat of an oligopoly: what happens if Bayer buys Monsanto, DuPont and Dow AgroSciences merge and Syngenta belongs to ChemChina? Then "Seed Giants" would decide what is bred and grown, and ultimately decide which foods are available. He gave ten recommendations for the development of a national plant breeding strategy which included open access to seeds and biological diversity, less influence of major seed companies, strengthening organic agriculture, breeding program for domestic protein crops, protection of GMO-free production which includes new plant breeding techniques.

Stig Tanzmann, agricultural spokesperson for the German Bread for the World Organization, called on policy to prevent the acquisition of Monsanto by Bayer. The same is true for the other planned or currently running takeovers or mergers. According to Tanzmann, traditionally-strong research within universities and government agencies are becoming increasingly oriented towards cooperation with large corporations. Here, a strong focus on biotechnological methods such as genetic engineering and the further decoding of plant genetics has been laid, which have benefited above all the large corporations. He strongly questioned this orientation since it does not really consider the diversity that

exists in the German plant breeding.

Peter Latus of the Swiss Office for Agriculture explained the development of the Swiss national breeding strategy. He explained that there had been doubts about whether the Swiss agricultural sector has suitable varieties of the necessary plant species available in the medium to long term. So, the aim of the strategy is the development of new varieties of agricultural cultivation concerning Switzerland, but international cooperation is indispensable. Two priority actions are currently in progress, explained Latus. First, the preliminary works started for the development of the Swiss Centre for Plant Breeding. Secondly, a team of experts from research and the value chain will advise on the publicly-funded breeding portfolios.

Background Information

The Parliamentary Advisory Council on Sustainable Development has a multidisciplinary, cross-section oriented mission, which is set by the Federal Chancellery. The Council's long-term agenda goes beyond current political conflicts. Decisions are made as far as possible by a consensus of all parties represented in the German Parliament. Thus, decisions have validity beyond legislature periods, since decision-making takes place independently from Parliament. In addition, the Council follows and makes recommendations for the national sustainability strategy of the Federal Government, the European sustainable development strategy and the sustainability policy of the Federal Government on the international level.