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Romania Reaffirms Role of Scientific Opinion for not Supporting Danube Soya Declaration

Report Categories:

Biotechnology - GE Plants and Animals

Agriculture in the News

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Report Highlights:

On January 19 Romania declined to sign the Danube Soya Declaration rolled out during Green Week activities in Germany. The Declaration promotes GM-free soya cultivation and processing in the Danube region. Romania's Agricultural Minister positioned that any change in his country's policy concerning biotechnology would first take into account scientific opinions expressed by European bodies and national academic community.

General Information:

The Danube Soya Association, founded in 2012 as an international multi-stakeholder association based in Vienna, is comprised of members active as farmers, agricultural traders, feed companies, major retailers, as well as green organizations. This Association's mission goal, with support from the Austrian Government, is to reduce the European Union's high dependence on imported protein (especially soybean-derived products). The Danube Soya Association is promoting GM-free soya cultivation and processing in the Danube region sufficient to supply Austria and the rest of Europe, as well as to build a reliable soya and soya meal supply chain through the association member states.

The association is targeting countries within the Danube River watershed. Some of these countries do not have conditions suitable for cultivating soybeans which has manifested in attitudes reluctant towards adoption of modern technologies and/or official bans on cultivation of crops of such technology, such as appearing in Hungary and Austria. In order to generate more political support for the Danube Soya Declaration proposal, the Minister of Agriculture from Austria approached the Ministers of Agriculture from targeted countries seeking support for this project, including the Minister from Romania.

During the Green Week event held in Berlin, the Danube countries formally signed the Soy Common Declaration. Romania was not among the signatory countries. In a press release the Romanian Minister of Agriculture explained Romania's rationale, noting appreciation for Austria's initiative to work towards identifying protein sources sufficient to cover the needs of Europe's livestock industry while stating that any decision towards this project would be based on the scientific opinion of academic groups, which are not finalized yet. The Ministry release further notes that Romania would remain consistent with past practices and take into account scientific opinions expressed by the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) and the national academic community. Apart from the opinions of the scientific community, Romania considers important the opinions of farmers' organizations and producer associations.

Romania is recognized as the country holding the highest soybean production potential in the watershed. Its non-support for the Declaration disappointed members of the Danube Soya Association and anti-technology advocates. One of Romania's most active anti-biotech proponent, Agent Green, accused the Minister of Agriculture for being a "Monsanto's marionette" and called for "prompt reaction by the Romanian Prime Minister to make sure Romania would sign the Danube Soya declaration before the 2013 sowing season started." According to that organization, Romanian farmers are being offered a great opportunity to increase soybean production through this project, which may enable them to produce at least 600,000 MT of soybean meal. This would translate into a soybean crop yielding at least 800,000 MT (as compared to 110,000 MT produced in 2012) or planting of 450,000 HA to soybeans (compared to last year's total acreage of 70,000 HA). However, upon examination of the Danube Soya Declaration proposal, no clear incentives or means are provided that would encourage farmers to expand soybean acreage.

Romania is an important player in the protein field given its experience cultivating soybeans and its favorable climatic conditions for crops. In 2006, the year prior to EU membership, Romania planted about 190,000 HA to soybeans, of which about 70 percent consisted of Roundup Ready (RR) bioengineered soybeans. Since the EU prohibited RR soybeans, Romania's soybean area contracted quickly upon accession to settle at around the 65,000 HA/year level today. Low yields, high production cost, and fierce competition from large soybean producing countries make cultivating conventional

soybeans unattractive to many Romanian farmers. However, given their positive experience cultivating bioengineered soybeans previously, Romanian farmers openly look forward to a favorable decision at the EU level that would allow them to once again cultivate soybeans enhanced through modern technology.