



## **WORKSHOP REPORT**

### **Transcontainer Eastern European Stakeholders Workshop**

for interested parties on the potential socio-economic and regulatory impacts of  
biologically contained GM plants in European agriculture

**Plovdiv, Bulgaria, 7 May, 2008**

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## 1. BACKGROUND

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“Transcontainer” is European Commission-funded Specific Targeted Research or Innovation Project (STREP) in the Sixth Framework Programme Priority 5: Food Quality and Safety. It aims at developing efficient and stable biological containment systems for genetically modified plants. Transcontainer’s strategic objectives are:

- Facilitating co-existence of genetically modified (GM) and non-GM (including organic) agricultural systems in Europe by using stable, environmentally safe and commercially viable biological containment strategies in crops economically relevant for Europe.
- Assessing the biosafety of biologically contained GM crops and their potential benefit to co-existence, as well as socio-economic impacts of their deployment in European agriculture.
- Enhancing understanding and acceptance by stakeholders and the general public of co-existence through biological containment strategies by invoking dialogue with and between these groups, and by facilitating informed policy and public debates on their consequences for co-existence measures.

The development of biological containment strategies for GM plants aims at addressing two issues, which are now fiercely disputed by stakeholders in the agro-food chain, that is ‘co-existence of GM crops and non-GM crops’ and ‘outcrossing of GM crops to weedy and wild relatives. Stakeholders interested in these issues include biotechnology companies, seed firms, food and feed manufacturers, retailers, conventional and organic farmers, consumer and environmental groups and regulators.

Against this background a workshop was organised with the aim to solicit stakeholders’ views on the potential deployment of biologically contained GM crops in European agriculture with a focus on Eastern European and Associate countries. In this context, it should be noted that in 2007 four Eastern European countries in the EU officially planted Bt maize on commercial basis: Czech Republic – 5,000 ha; Slovakia – 900 ha; Romania – 350 ha and Poland – 327 ha. On the other hand, 23 regions, 85 communities, 33 municipalities and 2 cities in the EU, with many in Eastern European countries declared themselves “GMO-free zones” in 2007.

The workshop was organised by University of Plovdiv in Plovdiv, Bulgaria, on 7 May 2008. Participants from Albania, Bulgaria, Check Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, the US Embassy’s Agricultural Counselor and the Transontainer partners were welcomed by Prof. Ivan Minkov, Bulgarian NCP, Head of Department of Plant Physiology and Molecular Biology, University of Plovdiv, Bulgaria.

## **2. PRESENTATIONS**

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### **2.1 Coexistence: Politics rather than science**

Prof Jaroslav Drobnik from the Department of Genetics and Microbiology, Faculty of Science, Charles University, Czech Republic and President of BIOTRIN Association (a non-profit organization formed by academic community for dissemination of information on modern biotechnology) provided a political analysis of the issue of co-existence. In his contribution he presented a series of facts, showing the pros and cons of conventional breeding compared to those of GM technology. Subsequently, he stressed the importance of communication between scientists and stakeholders, also in the context of EU research programs such as Co-extra and Transcontainer. His main conclusions were: 1) According to the EU legislation, co-existence can be used as a simple tool to ban GMOs, and; 2) The label “GM-free” could be good business when used as an advertising slogan in a market where more than 50 % misinformed and frightened Europeans are ready to pay for their superstition.

### **2.2 GMO regulations, policy and public opinion in Lithuania**

In her presentation Dr Natalija Guseva, Chief Specialist, Food Safety and Quality Department, Quality Division, Ministry of Agriculture, Lithuania on the legislative framework for GMOs and public perceptions of GMO in Lithuania. The main responsible bodies are: 1) the Ministry of Environment – responsible for authorisation of GMOs; 2) the Ministry of Agriculture – responsible for ensuring co-existence of conventional and GM plants; 3) the Ministry of Health – responsible for GM food safety, and; 4) the State Food and Veterinary Institute – responsible for enforcement and control of GMO-based products. The speaker also provided insight in ex-ante coexistence regulations in Lithuania. Further, according to public research, 22,9 % of the population in Lithuania supports the use of GMOs in their country, whereas 77,1 % are against their use. The most important aspects for Lithuania include: 1) avoidance of contamination of traditional and ecological farms with GMOs; 2) ensuring farmers’ and consumers’ right of choice; 3) ensuring the supply of safe food (no allergens, no toxins, no unintended health impacts), and; 3) ensuring a coordinated development of agriculture and market.

### **2.3 The new Polish Law on GMOs**

Prof Tomasz Twardowski, Head of Department in Institute of Bioorganic Chemistry, Polish Academy of Sciences in Poznan and Professor at Faculty of Biotechnology, Technical University of Lodz, Poland, discussed several aspects of the new Polish legislation for GMOs. The previous Polish Government (till November 2007) wanted Poland to be “GMO-free zone” and therefore trade of GM seeds and GM feed were forbidden, while a brand new “Law on GMO” was being prepared. Yet, these legislative

activities at the national level were contradictory to the EU legislative framework on GMOs. In January 20, 2008, the European Commission learned from the new Polish Government that Polish legislation concerning GMO will be coherent with EU directives. About 70% of Poles are against GMO, whereas over 90% of Polish experts are in favour of GMOs. The farmers in general want to have right to choose and more than 60% are ready to take advantage of genetically modified corn (Bt 10) due to massive attack of insects. According to the speaker, the future lies in harmonisation of law and freedom of choice.

#### **2.4 The Hungarian GMO situation**

Dr. Géza Kovács, senior researcher organic plant breeding at the Agricultural Research Institute of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, presented a series of events and (political) moments, thereby clarifying the Hungarian GMO situation. Since 1999 a comprehensive law on GMOs has been in place in Hungary, that was modified in 2002 to comply with EU Directive 2001/18. However, there is now Hungarian GMO Ban because of a recent national regulation, which makes it practically impossible to grow GM plants in Hungary, except for research purposes under a strict regulatory control. Possible reasons of the ban could be economic reasons, environmental aspects, social aspects and health aspects. The speaker further pointed out that from science to consumers there are completely different interest rates in the agro-food production chain. Moreover, the Government of Hungary is actively defending the moratorium, because of lacking coexistence legislation. The critical point regarding public acceptance of GMOs is consumer preferences. In his view, most Hungarian farmers are ready to grow GM crops if: 1) Multiple traits are offered; 2) They are of better quality, more resistant and cheaper than conventional seeds.

#### **2.5 Public concerns and the GMO legal framework in Albania**

Prof. Edmond Panariti from the University of Agriculture, Tirana, Albania, indicated that the Council of Ministers may (soon) agree with a proposal of the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Consumer Protection and Minister of Health to temporarily or permanently prohibit the import of novel foods containing genetically modified organisms in case of lack of the relevant scientific information and knowledge about the possible extent of the negative consequences to human life and health. Regarding public perception, most Albanians are hostile to GMOs. In December 2003, the Parliamentary Commission of Agriculture has recommended the government to install a 5-year moratorium on GMOs and several green and environmental groups have urged for a 5 year ban of all GMOs in Albania.

## **2.6 Coexistence: Present Challenges in Bulgaria**

In their joint presentation Dr. Nevena Alexandrova and Prof. Atanas Atanassov of the Agrobioinstitute in Bulgaria pointed out that coexistence of GM, conventional and organic farming can be achieved at a certain level if adequate labelling threshold values would be implemented. Unfortunately, the Bulgarian GMO Act “haste makes waste” story makes clear that it is in discrepancy with the principles of 1) a science-based approach; 2) proportionality; appropriate scale, and; 3) stimulating research EU policy. In their view, there is a need for amendments of the Bulgarian GMO Act, while EU policy on GMOs should be more accurate in its decision-making and clearer in its messages.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

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After the presentation Piet Schenkelaars, a private consultant who chaired the meeting, invited all participants to discuss the presentations. One of the participants then provided an extensive overview of the current situation concerning agriculture in Bulgaria and the use of GM crops. Since a new, very restrictive law on GMOs came into force in 2005, the numbers of field trials with GM crops dropped to zero, whereas in the previous decade Bulgaria was the lead country in Eastern Europe in the field of GM crops. As a result, the situation has become for embarrassing for Bulgarian scientists working in this field. Several other participants therefore stressed the importance of good communication between science, industry, politics and the general public, in particular consumer organisations.

However, one participant, a member of the Hungarian Round Table, expressed her outspoken position against the use of GM crops in agriculture because of their risks to the environment and human health. Though, she did not oppose biotechnology research *per se*. Another participants subsequently challenged this position by posing a provocative question: Would you accept GM plants if they would produce unique substances that could help treating cancer? Obviously, the answer was yes.

Moreover, some participants argued that governments must make decisions based on science, while value-based decisions are made by the market. In this context, most participants agreed that freedom of choice for both farmers and consumers should not be jeopardised by the deployment of GM crops in European agriculture. Therefore, it was important to establish appropriate isolation distances between cultivation systems with GM crops and non-GM crops, while methods that limit cross pollination, such biological containment strategies, could further facilitate coexistence of cultivation systems with and without GM crops. Most participants therefore supported the objectives of Transcontainer.

## **ANNEX I: LIST OF WORKSHOP PARTICIPANTS**

1. Alexandra Ribarits - University of Vienna, Austria.
2. Alisher Touraev - University of Vienna, Austria.
3. Atanas Atanassov - Agrobiointitute, Bulgaria.
4. Bojin Bojinov - Agrarian University, Bulgaria.
5. Christian Sig Jensen - DLF-Trifolium A/S Research Division, Denmark.
6. Christiane Koziolk - Federal Office of Consumer Protection and Food Safety, Germany
7. Claudia Mossoiu – National Contact Point for priority FAFB, VII FP, Romania.
8. Detlef Bartsch - Federal Office of Consumer Protection and Food Safety, Germany.
9. Edmond Panariti - University of Agriculture, Tirana, Albania.
10. El Hadji Fall - Wageningen University Research, Social Sciences Group, The Netherlands.
11. Elena Apostolova - University of Plovdiv, Bulgaria.
12. Emil Milkov – Agro Bio Seed Company, Bulgaria.
13. Gergana Zahmanova - University of Plovdiv, Bulgaria
14. Géza Kovács - Agricultural Research Institute, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Hungary.
15. Gints Lanka – Seed Production Division, Department of Agriculture, Ministry of Agriculture, Republic of Latvia.
16. Giuseppe Rotino - CRA-Research Institute for Vegetable Crops, Italy.
17. Ineta Jekabsons – Seed Production Division, Department of Agriculture, Ministry of Agriculture, Republic of Latvia.
18. Ivan Minkov - University of Plovdiv, Bulgaria.
19. Ivo Brants – Monsanto Company, Brussels, Belgium.
20. Jaroslav Drobnik – Department of Genetics and Microbiology, Faculty of Science, Charles University and BIOTRIN Association, Czech Republic.
21. Jeroen van Arkel - Plant Research International B.V., The Netherlands.
22. Justus Wesseler - Wageningen University Research, Social Sciences Group, The Netherlands.
23. Kim Boutilier - Plant Research International B.V., The Netherlands.
24. Laura Toppino - CRA-Research Institute for Vegetable Crops, Italy.
25. Maarten Kooiker - University of Milan, Italy.
26. Magnus Hertzberg - Swetree Technologies, Sweden.
27. Marten Kater - University of Milan, Italy.
28. Matias Lindner - University of Vienna, Austria.
29. Matthew McCabe - National University of Ireland Maynooth, Ireland.
30. Michele Bellucci - Institute of Plant Genetics, Research Division of Perugia, Italy.
31. Milena Kostova - University of Plovdiv, Bulgaria.
32. Nastasia Belc – Institute of Food Bioresources, Romania.
33. Natalija Guseva - Food Safety and Quality Department, Quality Division, Ministry of Agriculture, Lithuania
34. Nevena Alexandrova - Agrobiointitute, Bulgaria.
35. Ove Nilsson - Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Umeå, Sweden.

36. Oxana Habustova – Biology Center, Academy of Sciences, Czech Republic.
37. Philip Dix - National University of Ireland Maynooth, Ireland.
38. Piet Schenkelaars - Schenkelaars Biotechnology Consultancy, The Netherlands.
39. Ruud de Maagd - Plant Research International B.V., The Netherlands.
40. Samir Naimov - University of Plovdiv, Bulgaria.
41. Sandorne Acs – farmer and member of the Hungarian GMO Round Table, Hungary.
42. Sergio Arcioni - Institute of Plant Genetics-Research (CNR-IGV), Perugia, Italy.
43. Susan Reid - Agricultural Counsellor of USA embassy, USA.
44. Tomasz Twardowski - Institute of Bioorganic Chemistry, Polish Academy of Sciences, Poznan, Faculty of Biotechnology, Technical University of Lodz, Poland.
45. Valentina Toneva - University of Plovdiv, Bulgaria.
46. Zdenka Svobodova - Biology Center, Academy of Sciences, Czech Republic.

## ANNEX II: WORKSHOP AGENDA

9.30 – 9.40h	Prof. Ivan Minkov, University of Plovdiv, Bulgaria Welcome to the participants.
9.40 – 10.00h	Prof. Jaroslav Drobnik, Department of Genetics and Microbiology, Faculty of Science, Charles University; President of BIOTRIN Association, Czech Republic Coexistence - Politics Rather than Science
10.00 – 10.20h	Dr Natalija Guseva Food Safety and Quality Department, Quality Division, Ministry of Agriculture, Lithuania GMO regulations, policy and opinion in Lithuania.
10.20 – 11.00h	Coffee Break
11.00 – 11.20h	Prof. Tomasz Twardowski, Department in Institute of Bioorganic Chemistry, Polish Academy of Sciences in Poznan, Faculty of Biotechnology, Technical University of Lodz, Poland, New Polish law on GMO.
11.20 – 12.30h	Discussion
12.30 – 13.30h	Lunch
13.30 – 13.50h	Dr. Géza Kovács Agricultural Research Institute, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Hungary The Hungarian GMO situation.
13.50 – 14.00h	Prof. Edmond Panariti, Univ. of Agriculture, Tirana, Albania “Public concern and the GMO legal and institutional framework in Albania”
14.00 – 14.20h	Prof. Atanas Atanassov and Dr. Nevena Alexandrova, Agrobiointitute, Bulgaria. Coexistence: Present challenges in Bulgaria
14. 20 – 14.50h	Coffee Break
14.50 – 17.00h	Discussion
17.00h	End of the session