

Europe Approves Genetically Modified Corn as Animal Feed

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The European Union on Monday approved the importation of a genetically modified corn from the United States for animal feed, an important break in a six-year moratorium on the approval of biotechnology crops that has touched off a trade war.

The announcement of the approval in Brussels was met with relief at Monsanto, the biotechnology giant that produces the corn, where it was seen as a welcome change after years of rejection. The decision will allow the importation and sale of Roundup Ready Corn 2 feed corn, but not its cultivation.

"Europe's decision on Monday represents definite progress," said Lee Quarles, public affairs manager at Monsanto's headquarters in St. Louis. "We haven't seen action out of the European Union since 1998."

But the Bush administration said the decision would not deter it from pursuing its case against the European Union at the World Trade Organization, said Richard Mills, the spokesman for the United States trade representative.

"Our bottom line is Europe needs to have a predictable, timely, transparent and science-based regulatory system for biotech products," Mr. Mills said.

Europeans are far more suspicious of genetically modified food than Americans, and they consider the issue one of safety rather than free trade. European consumers have protested what they call "frankenfoods" and have said that American multinationals cannot force them to accept a product they consider unsafe for human consumption or for the environment.

The European Union has sought to ease consumer fears by passing stringent labeling rules in April to ensure that no one unknowingly purchases genetically modified food.

Margot Wallstrom, the top European official for the environment, who made the announcement on Monday, said in a statement that the corn, known as NK603 maize, had been rigorously tested and was considered "as safe as any conventional maize."

"Clear labeling provides farmer and consumers the information they need to decide whether to buy the product or not," she said.

She also underscored that the corn would be easily traced following the strict new rules.

Syngenta, the Swiss biotechnology company, won approval in May to sell a genetically modified sweet corn in the European Union, which does not include Switzerland.

Neither corn was approved for cultivation in Europe, where officials fear that sowing the seeds of biogenetically engineered crops will ruin the diversity of their plants and cause environmental damage.

The United States and Europe have been feuding over the issue since the moratorium began. It came to a boiling point last year when the Bush administration filed its case at the W.T.O., contending that the European ban amounted to an illegal trade barrier. That case is still pending.

At the same time, President Bush said that the European opposition to biotechnology was a threat to efforts to end world hunger because several African nations had rejected United States aid of genetically modified food for their starving populations. European officials dismissed the charges, saying that they gave a much larger proportion of their gross domestic product to aid developing countries and that they had not interfered with the American food aid program to Africa.

Some of the largest United States agriculture and biotechnology companies have invested billions of dollars during the last decade to develop genetically altered crops. Nearly 100 million acres of farmland in the United States are now planted with genetically altered crops, and agriculture officials say American farmers have lost at least \$1 billion over the last five years because they have been unable to export to Europe. One out of every three acres of farmland in the United States is planted for export.

Agribusinesses have pushed the administration to open the European market, potentially the most lucrative for them. Large farmers who grow these crops have been reminding law makers and officials that in this election year they carry special weight in swing states in the Midwest.

Monsanto will have to wait at least three more months to for the approval of the European Union to be finalized. Mr. Quarles of Monsanto said he was reluctant to guess when the genetically engineered feed corn will be exported and sold in Europe.

"This is the first step toward selling corn in Europe," he said. "We're optimistic we'll receive word from the European Commission in a timely fashion."

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