

Comments about the advice and recommendation around coexistence published by the French High Committee for Biotechnologies (HCB)

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I have been a member of CEES since 2009 and I took part to debates around coexistence all along 2011. I resigned on the day the CEES “recommendation” was presented by the HCB President. I thank Marcel Kuntz for having invited me to give my point of view.

Summary

The end of the debate at CEES about coexistence led to the resignation of several main economical and social stakeholders: CFDT (Trade Unions), FNSEA (farmers), ANIA (agro-industry), GNIS (breed producers) and Young Farmers. The reason was the radical refusal of any rule or agreement for coexistence claimed by a small number of environmental associations and organic farmers organizations. Their attitude forbids the CEES in the future to analyse any demand for growing genetically modified plants with an open-minded view and to provide decision-making authorities with a balanced proposal. Any further participation to the debate would be useless.

Significantly this “anti-GMO” attitude relies on a total denial of any role for science in plant breeding improvement and more globally in the living environment. The CEES failed to provide the general public and the layman with objective information around genetically modified plants (GMP).

Some decision-making politicians took advantage from the vagueness of previous CEES recommendations (anonymous enumeration of contradictory points of view) to display opposite positions and announcements between ministers belonging to the same government, up to the European level. A renewal of CEES implies restoring its role to provide honest information of citizens about GMO.

About the Scientific Committee Advice

The technical advice from the Scientific Committee was presented to CEES members. As a comment to John Davison’s remarks, I should say that I found the proposal of a new way for estimating the GMO content of a crop sample quite judicious.

Indeed, for the layman that tries to understand debates between experts, a percentage of transgene-bearing grains among a lot of grains is quite more concrete than “a level of modified DNA compared to the level of homologous non modified DNA in the haploid genome”. How many people know the ratio of transgene DNA to the total DNA amount, and the DNA amount of a vegetal organ? Marcel Kuntz is welcome to quote some quantitative data.

Moreover the whole grain acts as the vector of transgene dissemination during harvest and stocking. Once the harvest is ground for animal feed or human food, a transgenic DNA ratio is meaningful as an indicator all along the industrial and commercial chain. The CEES

recommendation should have agreed with this dual way of cross contamination quantification, and explained it to the general opinion. That is not a matter for controversial confrontation between experts.

About the CEES recommendation

Long before the debate on the recommendation, the acceptance of coexistence was an underlying problem during all sessions. Mutual respect between different production systems was permanently debated.

Stakeholders attached to “no GMO” (Organic Farming, “peasant” seeds and organic honey producers) behaved as a lobby defending its own economic and commercial interests against the GMO newcomer and also the conventional products. For organizations representing for small enterprises or independent workers this self-oriented attitude is logical. More surprisingly their speakers considered that any GMP culture, anywhere on the French territory, would kill their activities. I could not understand how they planned to take competitive advantage (in terms of price) from being “without GMO” if GMO products were not simultaneously offered on the market. GMO/non-GMO coexistence is the best situation for them from an economic point of view.

I did hope that the debate about coexistence would bring some light, and would increase mutual understanding.

The preparatory phase

A number of personalities and actors concerned by coexistence were auditioned by the working group chaired by Marie-Angèle Hermitte, for one year (2011). The output was the report on the recommendation, presented by MAH on this site. I gave my contribution and my approbation to this huge document, providing a lot of information, even though I did not agree with the global structure of the manuscript.

Indeed the first part “How to ensure long-term availability of all-type seeds?” deals only with the conventional and “peasant” seeds. I asked for transgenic seeds to be evoked; vainly, when their availability was hindered by political decisions in France and Europe, leading to loss of scientific and technical skills.

The excess of time devoted to description and juxtaposition of different points of view prevented the Committee from entering the crucial political debate for building a recommendation as early as needed. CFDT, FNSEA, ANIA and GNIS alerted the CEES Chairwoman about this delay, a one day session being planned on mid-December 2011. Indeed this provoked the writing of a shorter document to be debated, the recommendation.

The CEES recommendation

This text presents a sort of self-destruction of the CEES: it confirms an irreducible opposition between people confident that coexistence might be experimented and people rejecting the idea and concept of coexistence. Consequently any discussion about a specific demand for growing GMP will turn to obstruction against and compromise any balanced recommendation for the decision-making authorities. The CEES acknowledges that it is impossible to go on with its work.

FNSEA, ANIA, GNIS and CFDT jointly disagreed with this text (annex to the recommendation), pointing that both positions (for or against coexistence, which is distinct from pro- or anti-GMO) were presented as equally supported.

Yet the position recommending an experimental assessment of coexistence, expected as a benefit for the whole society, was supported by a majority of CEES members. The indication of organizations supporting each position is mentioned at the end of the text. There it can be seen that the Association of French Departments is favorable to an experimentation of coexistence, whereas the Association of Regions denies any possibility of coexistence (A Region in France is composed of three to six Departments...).

Should this majority had been taken into account by the President of HCB, a possibility for continuing with dialogue could be maintained. But his official press release did not mention this fact. So the President himself said stop to the CEES.

What would be useful for decision-making authorities should be to imagine and give a draft of which compromises society can build and accept. CEES was dedicated to this mission, and it failed. Departure was the only issue for those attached to mutual teaching and learning of tolerance. The five organizations CFDT, FNSEA, ANIA, GNIS and Young Farmers resigned.

Furthermore I must mention other points of divergence underlying oppositions between CEES members.

Behind the refusal of coexistence, a radical refusal of Science

From months earlier I was aware of the real reason for obstruction to any compromise by some organizations. As they claimed in their oral and written announcements these organizations deny scientific and molecular approaches in plant genetic improvement and some of them refuse any human activity entering “the biosphere”. I refuted this publicly, outside of HCB, and these organizations asked the President for my eviction from the Committee (Nevertheless I was not dismissed).

Evidence for this anti-science attitude is brought through a number of hitches:

At CEES I had to endure discussions face to face with members that had approved the destruction of INRA transgenic vineyard in Colmar in 2010, the work tool of public researchers and technicians that I represent. What did they claim on the placards left in the wrecked vine parcel? “Here is scientism”.

During the last moments of the debate about coexistence, I had obtained that the recommendation should include “a support to development of scientific methods contributing to plant improvement by public researchers”. Instantly anti-GMO members laughed derisively saying that it resulted in the opposite of improvement, and they asked to put inverted commas to the term of improvement. The CEES Chairwoman agreed .I announced that I should go out of the room immediately, and the inverted commas were removed. That is the type of compromise the CEES was able to produce.

Let us be lucid: the refusal of science and technology in the life field is growing in our societies, particularly in Europe. Regarding poorly or partially informed citizens this rejection is enhanced by people using it for their own economic interests, or with geopolitical and ideological views. With a loss of scientific and technical education, so missing in the general knowledge building, the GMO refusal symbolizes the fracture between “those who know” and simple citizens. The anti-science attitude is part of the new unique way of thinking at the XXIst century.

Behind the confusion in CEES, a will to use HCB recommendations for political purposes

From the beginning the democratic process of approving texts through voting was refused by the chairwoman, arguing that most members preferred anonymous display of all opinions, without any indication of a majority choice.

This allowed the different ministers concerned by HCB recommendations (mainly Agriculture and Environment-Ecology) to pick up what was convenient for their political field.

The Minister for Ecology, a member of a so-declared pro-European government, thus announced publicly that she should cunningly play with dates of maize sowing to publish again an interdiction of growing MON 810 in 2012, so that no appeal should have time to occur. At exactly the same time the Minister for Agriculture deposited a technical text at Brussels organizing coexistence, with no reference to the HCB advice, as if France was going to authorize GMP culture. Few days later, the same Minister for Agriculture published a decree depicting a new definition of "without GMO" products, contradictory with the above text but conform to some parts of a CEES recommendation and leading to strong difficulties when growing GMP.

Is there a future for CEES?

We are attending the demolition of any trust in science, experts, researchers (academic or industrial) altogether, in the citizen minds. We must acknowledge that scientific and technological communities had a responsibility for this state of mind, through silence, lies and falsifications sometimes. GMP killed nobody, but there were deaths caused by duly authorized drugs, by atomic industry. So all is mixed in the public understanding of science.

Simultaneously all politicians call upon the role of innovation and knowledge to maintain a social and economical background adapted to better level of employment in Europe. Nevertheless economical consequences of refusal of GMP in Europe are already obvious.

CEES failed to enlighten the importance of scientific and technological development; the Colmar destruction, whereas the experiment was duly authorized after a debate at CEES, meaning that innovation should be enclosed inside barbed wire barriers.

Contrasting with other technologies, biotechnologies are highly controlled in France both at the technical and social levels, through committees like CS and CEES in HCB ; those people that take advantage from spreading fear led to the failure of CEES. Deliberately, they deprive society of a tool for social regulation of innovation.

Coexistence is not only the fact of growing GMP and non-GMP in neighbouring fields. Coexistence in the minds should be reinforced. Scientific and technological knowledge should be rehabilitated and rendered acceptable by loyal-minded citizens.

Renewal of CEES will come from external actors that struggle for conciliating natural space preservation and intelligent regulation of novel biotechnologies. The mission of some new CEES, going beyond its role towards decision-making authorities, should be devoted to objective and sustainable information of citizens.