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NOTE

From: General Secretariat of the Council
To: Delegations

Subject: International Ministerial Conference on "GMO free agriculture: a chance for rural development in Central and South Eastern Europe" (Vienna, 9–10 May 2017)
- Information from the Austrian and Hungarian delegations

Delegations will find in Annex an information note received from the Austrian and Hungarian delegations on the above mentioned subject to be dealt with under "Any other business" at the "Agriculture and Fisheries" Council on 17-18 July 2017.

NOTE FOR THE COUNCIL AGRICULTURE OF 17/18 JULY 2017 ON TOP AOB
INTERNATIONAL MINISTERIAL CONFERENCE ON GMO-FREE AGRICULTURE

On 10 May 2017 a conference of Ministers and high-ranking representatives from Central and South-Eastern European countries was held in Vienna, at the Austrian Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Environment and Water Management, to discuss the topic “GMO-free agriculture: a chance for rural development in Central and South Eastern Europe”. The conference was the result of a joint Hungarian-Austrian initiative.

The background of the event was the 20th anniversary of the Austrian referendum on genetic engineering which proved to be one of the most successful referendums in Austrian history. Even today - 20 years later - Austrians firmly reject food produced using genetically modified organisms.

Based on examples, the favourable impacts of GMO-free production in Austria were outlined. Another priority of the event was the Danube Soya Initiative launched by Austria. Danube Soya is considered as the biggest European initiative in the field of agriculture. It represents a strategic partnership for the production of GMO-free soya and organic soya in the Danube region. The main objectives are to create sustainable value-added chains and to enhance the competitiveness of local producers of soya. Labelling products as “GMO-free” and the introduction of EU standards will play a vital role in this context.

In Hungary there is also a wide political and public consensus on the GMO-free agricultural strategy which is formalised in the new fundamental law of Hungary adopted in 2012. Hungary took several steps in order to achieve and sustain GMO-free agriculture, “from farm to fork”, including the introduction of a new GMO-free labelling scheme, as well as taking efforts to find appropriate substitutes of GM soya with a view to create a GMO-free food chain. In the spirit of cooperation, the „Alliance for a GMO Free Europe” initiative has been started by the Hungarian Minister of Agriculture that aimed to reach and maintain the GM-free status of European countries

at different levels. Hungary was among those countries which joined the Danube Soya Declaration and recently co-initiated the European Soya Declaration.

In spite of all efforts the demand for GMO-free soya meal is far from being met in Europe. Even though GMO-free soya production has increased in Europe over the past few years, large amounts of soya meal still need to be imported.

Chances for Rural Development

Ministers largely agreed that the non-use of genetic engineering, which has been legally established in the form of the right of self-determination since 2015, offers great opportunities for rural development in Central and South Eastern Europe and is of prime importance as regards regional food security and food safety.

The flexibility of the Common Agricultural Policy should be used to promote diversification in rural areas and to encourage the promotion of protein crops and legumes under the agri-environmental programme, thereby taking rural development measures of sustained impact.

Farms practising sustainable management, organic farming and regions declared GMO-free are to receive targeted support. In particular, greater attention is to be paid to small-scale farms when creating niche markets and developing marketing and export opportunities of regional products.

We should bear in mind the growing consumer wishes for high-quality and regional products with transparent labelling. They give additional impulses in the field of environmentally sound and economically sustainable rural production.

Mutual exchange of experiences and the development of strategic partnerships and joint programmes, as well as support by the Common Agricultural Policy are essential to promote the above-mentioned objectives.

Agreed Conclusions

1. to recognize the importance of regional cooperation in the field of agriculture and rural development on achieving harmonized frameworks and establish common mechanisms of collaboration essential for environmental and economic sustainability of the Central and South-Eastern European region.
2. to acknowledge and consider taking advantage of the flexibility of the Common Agricultural Policy of the EU to promote rural diversification, to encourage protein crops and legumes production under the agro-environmental programs and implement measures for sustainable rural development;
3. to accord high priority in supporting GMO-free areas and organic farming in countries/regions of small-scale farming structure and/or in regions with higher densities of niche markets for creating market and export opportunities of regional products in line with EU-compliant standards;
4. to draw attention to the promotion of regional value in support of genetically unmodified agricultural production that is environmentally sound and economically sustainable for the rural population and the national economy;
5. to highlight the value of meeting consumer demands and choice by creating transparent and traceable production, reliable and controlled product labeling for brand programs and products;

6. to recognize the work of the inter alia International Danube Soya Association and the Regional Rural Development Standing Working Group (SWG) in South and Eastern Europe (SEE) devoted to regional ownership and integration efforts to the scope of realizing sustainable agriculture and regional development in the Danube and SEE regions;
 7. to emphasize the need of strategic partnership and programs, know-how transfer and better practice models for sustainable agro-food production and rural development in addition to the prevailing activities in the region, and call for international and EU commitment in cooperation with existing regional structures for pursuing these goals;
 8. to stress the necessity of mutual action, through regional organizations and in collaboration with all other partners concerned with rural development, to seek the optimal and sustainable use of agricultural and natural resources, to increase organic production practice by promoting rural development measures and monitoring, therefore ensuring added value to national socio-economic goals while attaining regional food security.
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