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From: General Secretariat of the Council
To: Delegations

Subject: Outcome of the conference on "Modern Biotechnologies in Agriculture:
Paving the way for responsible innovation" (Brussels, 28 September 2017)
- Information from the Commission

Delegations will find in Annex an information note from the Commission on the above mentioned subject to be raised under "Any other business" at the meeting of the Council ("Agriculture and Fisheries") on 11 and 12 December 2017.

Commission conference on "Modern Biotechnologies in Agriculture - Paving the way for responsible innovation" (Brussels, 28 September 2017)

The Commission endeavours to promote an open and transparent discussion with all stakeholders on innovative approaches in the agri-food sector, resulting from the use of modern biotechnologies. With this in mind, the Commission organised, on 28 September 2017, a high level conference on "Modern Biotechnologies in Agriculture - Paving the way for responsible innovation". Around 350 people attended the conference, including the Estonian Minister of Rural Affairs, Tarmo Tamm, Members of the European Parliament, prominent European policy makers, industry stakeholders, representatives of civil society, scientists, and experts from Member States. Furthermore, several hundred people followed the conference through web streaming.

During the past decade, a number of innovations have developed in bioscience. Because of this, the Commission mandated the Scientific Advice Mechanism (SAM) to present a state of play of the new techniques in agricultural biotechnologies.

The SAM conclusions, presented at the conference, show that:

- All living organisms are subject to alterations to their genetic information due to molecular processes which can occur spontaneously and/or due to exposure to environmental stressors.
- All breeding techniques applicable in agriculture make use of "genetic diversity and change" in order to allow the selection of desirable traits, whether such changes occur naturally or result from human intervention.
- There is heterogeneity within modern biotechnologies: some of these techniques do not lead to the inclusion of genetic material from other species or to changes of genetic sequences, whereas others do.

Key messages of the conference were:

- The EU's high level of safety in the food area must not be compromised.
- We need consumer confidence, including on the objectives pursued when using the new techniques.
- Member States have the duty of being more active and more engaged at EU, national and regional levels.
- Innovation alone is not sufficient: it needs to take account of civil society's needs, acceptance and trust.
- Risk-benefit analysis and decision-making must be transparent.
- Explaining and communicating the benefits and risks is the responsibility of all: companies, academics, policy-makers and NGOs.
- Different types of farming do and should co-exist, including agro-ecologic practices (i.e. application of ecological concepts and principles to optimise interactions between plants, animals, humans and the environment).

During the conference, legal uncertainty was repeatedly alluded to; in this context, it is important to mention that the Court of Justice of the European Union will render - probably in Spring next year - a ruling on (i) whether organisms produced by targeted mutagenesis techniques are excluded from the GMO-legislation and; (ii) whether Member States can regulate exempted organisms. The future ruling will address some but not all questions related to modern biotechnologies. The outcome of the ruling will need to be analysed thoroughly in order to assess the impact and decide what should be done next.

The Commission is willing to continue the dialogue, initiated with the September conference, with all Member States and is committed to work with the European Parliament, the Council and other stakeholders, including civil society, towards defining a common and constructive way forward.