

French body says Monsanto maize needs more study

Reuters

PARIS (Reuters) - More research is needed into Monsanto's genetically modified maize MON 810, the only biotech crop commercially grown in Europe, to assess its environmental impact, a French advisory body said.

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The opinion given by biotech committee HCB, published on Tuesday, was requested by the French government, which last year banned cultivation of MON 810 citing environmental concerns.

In a debate about whether to renew the license for the maize type, France and other European Union states have criticized as insufficient a favorable opinion in June from the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA).

HCB called for further studies to evaluate potential drawbacks in MON 810, such as damage to non-targeted insects or the development of resistance to the crop among targeted pests.

"The only way to highlight ... a significant increase or decrease in populations of non-targeted invertebrates is to implement monitoring over several years," the HCB said.

The committee also said more work was needed to establish the benefits of the maize type versus other growing techniques, especially in areas not significantly affected by the pests MON 810 was designed to resist.

The views of the committee would be presented by France in European discussions on MON 810, which are due to lead to a conclusion by EU technical representatives in February, an official at the French environment ministry said.

But HCB's paper also showed how divisive the issue is within France. A vote by a subcommittee made up of farm unions, environmental associations, scientific and parliamentary bodies, on the overall value of MON 810 showed a narrow majority of 14 to 11 saying the maize had more disadvantages than benefits.

In a separate opinion also released on Tuesday, French food safety body AFSSA reiterated that, like EFSA, it considered MON 810 to be as safe as conventional maize for human and animal health, although it also called for further research.

(Reporting by Gus Trompiz, editing by Anthony Barker)

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