

EU Court Puts Limits On Modified Honey

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BRUSSELS (AP) -- Honey that contains traces of pollen from genetically modified crops needs special authorization before it can be sold in Europe, the European Union's top court said Tuesday, in a judgment that could have widespread consequences on the bloc's policy on genetically modified organisms, or GMOs.

The ruling from the European Court of Justice came after several Bavarian beekeepers demanded compensation from their government for honey and food supplements that contained traces of pollen from genetically modified maize.

The beekeepers had their hives close to fields where the Bavarian government was growing Monsanto's MON 810 maize for research purposes.

The EU has strict guidelines on authorizing and informing consumers about foods containing GMOs -- a policy that has caused problems for producers of genetically modified seeds such as U.S.-based Monsanto Co. that are used to much laxer rules in other parts of the world.

Kelli Powers, a spokeswoman for Monsanto, said the company could not provide detailed comment on the ruling until the firm had a chance to read the entire judgment.

But Powers emphasized that the company's engineered corn seed has been approved as safe for human consumption.

"...the safety of MON 810 is confirmed by multiple regulatory approvals, including those in the EU, and by up to 15 years of successful commercial use and consumption of MON810 corn products in the EU and around the world," Powers said in an e-mail.

Environmental activists said Tuesday's ruling will force the 17-country European Union to strengthen the rules even further at a time they worried the bloc was dropping its zero-tolerance policy toward GMOs.

"This is a victory for beekeepers, consumers and the movement for GMO-free agriculture in Europe," Mute Schimpf, a food campaigner for Friends of the Earth Europe, said in a statement. "This ruling rewrites the rule book and gives legal backing to stronger measures to prevent contamination from the likes of Monsanto."

Earlier this year, the EU approved rules to allow the import of animal feed contaminated with small traces of genetically modified crops -- a move that was heavily criticized by environmental groups.

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The EU and feed suppliers argued that a loosening of the ban was necessary because it was difficult to prevent minute traces of GMOs from finding their way into large shipments from overseas.

In its judgment on the honey, the Luxembourg-based court however seemed to take a stricter view.

The EU's "authorization scheme for foodstuffs containing ingredients produced from GMOs applies irrespective of whether the pollen is introduced intentionally or adventitiously into the honey," it said in its ruling.

The obligation to get special permission to sell the honey exists "irrespective of the proportion of genetically modified material contained in the product in question," the court added.

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AP Reporter Christopher Leonard in St. Louis contributed to this report.

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