

Sprouting Up...

Seed battles intensify in europe

Activists, farmers' groups, political parties and others are edging up the fight for more sustainable food systems in Europe based on GM-free and farmer-bred seeds.

On 8 February 2006, 26 European groups went to Brussels for a day to meet with the Green Group in the European Parliament (Green/EFA Alliance). The meeting focused on political strategy to support farmers' seeds systems in Europe. On the table were two major battle lines: the movement to legalise farmers' seeds and the movement to ban GMOs from European farming.

Liberating farmers' seeds

On farmers' seeds, the long-standing problem in Europe, since the 1970s, is that the EU's seed marketing regulations require that plant varieties are registered according to industrial criteria (genetic stability and uniformity) in order to be sold. This means that traditional materials and farmers' seeds cannot be marketed. Worse, the rules were updated in the 1990s to further stipulate that "marketing" includes non-monetary seed exchange. Some countries like France implement this ban on farmers' seeds more fanatically than others, but the legal reality is there: farmers, gardeners, hobbyists, breeders, associations and so on cannot exchange or sell any seed that is not on the official EU Common Catalogue – what GRAIN described as "agricultural apartheid" in an editorial last year.

In 1998, however, after years of political work from the Greens, the EU did adopt a directive opening up the possibility of legalising farmers seeds through a separate list or system for what the member states call "conservation varieties". The directive (98/95/EC) essentially says that the EU agrees to look into opening up a separate set of rules for the commercialisation of traditional varieties, an activity that is currently against the law.

The groups in Brussels took stock of the situation. The common assessment is that the Directive is not being implemented because of political opposition within the member states, based on strong pressure from the seed industry associations. This is despite concrete proposals from various farmers' seed networks on how best the Directive could be enforced to support the needs and objectives of the sustainable agriculture movement in Europe. The stakes are also growing higher: the EU is expanding, with new member states still rich in genetic diversity coming in; intellectual property rules that prevent farmers from saving seeds in Europe are growing harsher (e.g. France has just ratified UPOV 1991); and the pressure to allow GM seeds keeps growing (e.g. the WTO dispute panel has found the EU guilty of illegally banning GM in European agriculture).

The groups agreed to demand collectively that Directive 98/95/

EC on conservation varieties

- be made obligatory in all member states;
- recognise the existence of collective rights over traditional seeds as a buffer against privatisation and monopoly rights;
- follow the technical proposals drawn up by various seed savers' networks in Europe.

In essence, the Greens/EFA were requested to carry this platform through at the political level within the European Parliament, while the civil society groups will collaborate even more strongly on this issue through their movements and networks at the grassroots level. Of course, the ongoing legal "black-out" on the right of farmers to exchange and sell non-industrial seeds doesn't stop them from doing so. But the political opening that the EU agreed to make back in 1998 has to be pushed into reality.

The GM struggle intensifies

Seed diversity is dwindling under not only the effects of the Common Catalogue, the plant breeders' rights system, patenting and industrialisation, but also the potential onslaught of GM contamination from genetically engineered seeds, which could be the last straw. The fight against GM is the flip side of the fight for farmers' seeds and more localised, diversified and region-based agriculture and food systems in Europe.

While the EU upheld a sort of de facto moratorium against the planting and importation of GM seeds in Europe until last year, this has all been very fragile. There is no EU-wide ban on GM in Europe. Member states are free to accept GM seeds – if they are approved by the EU – for commercialisation and planting, as Spain has done for many years. They are also free to legislate their own "co-existence" policies to accommodate conventional, GM and organic farming. They are required to label GM seeds and foods, although the debate on thresholds (what % composition triggers the need for a label) has made many people unhappy with these laws.

From the side of the social movements, the political struggle has involved different strategies: focused on direct action to stop GM field trials and plantings, cautious support (by some) for strong co-existence laws at the local and national levels, and active engagement (by some) in the development and autonomous declaration of GM-free regions, etc. In the early months of this year, there were several meetings – the major ones being in Berlin, Brussels and Vienna – that allowed groups to take stock of the political strategy movement to block GM from penetrating Europe.





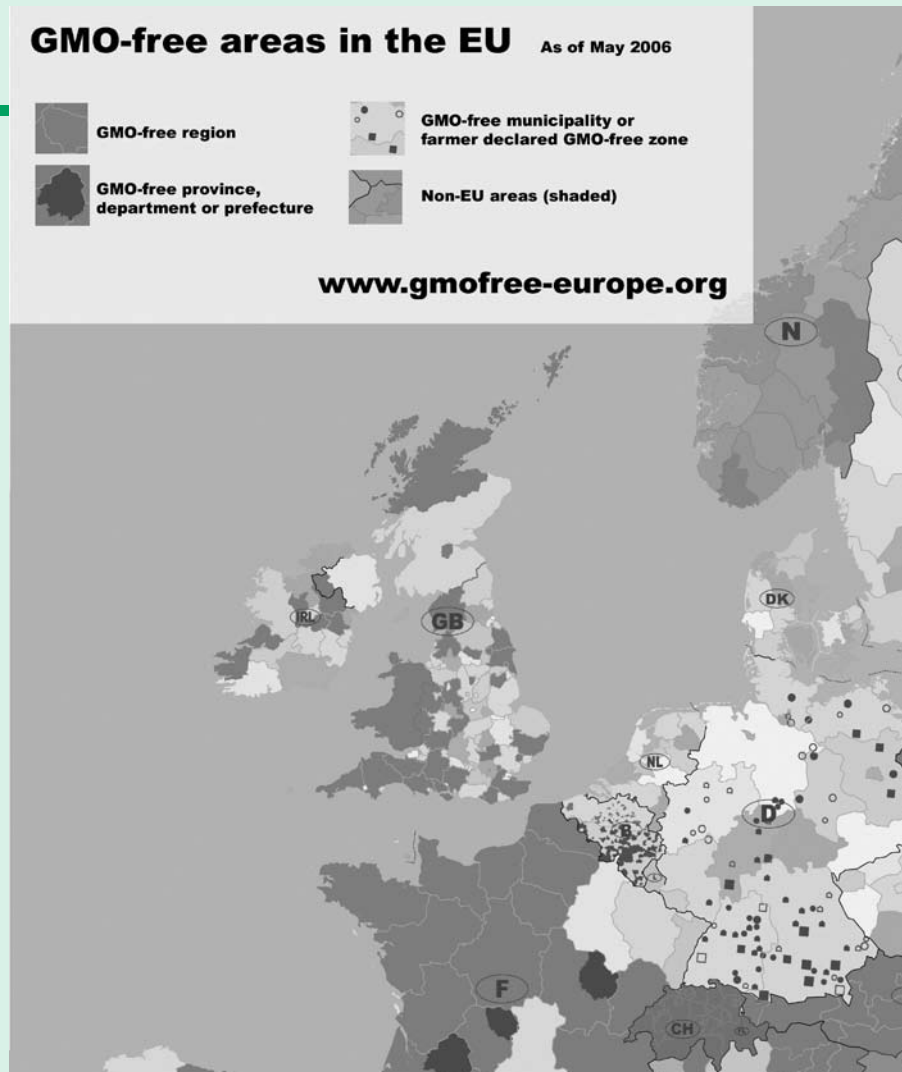
Global 2000

What emerges more and more is that social groups are

- against co-existence altogether as it makes contamination inevitable
- dissatisfied with the movement for GM-free regions in Europe, as in some cases or regions it has resulted in very top-down initiatives and it is not necessarily building a GM-free Europe
- finding that the lack of democratic space in Europe to choose food and farming systems is not improving

There have been some encouraging moves lately. The EU has responded to the WTO dispute panel report essentially saying that it will ignore it. And Poland has recently amended its seed law to ban the importation and planting of GM seeds altogether.

But the need for a strong European political campaign to assert a GM-free Europe at the European level is felt more greatly than ever. Groups are now considering an EU referendum to call for a ban on GM as a matter of self-determination.



GMO free Europe: Detail from a poster produced by Friends of the Earth showing areas that have defined themselves as GMO-free – one tactic to fight the establishment of coexistence legislation.

Going further

- Second European GMO-free Regions Conference, Berlin, 14–15 January 2006. <http://www.gmo-free-regions.org>
- BEDE, RSP and Crocevia, “Strategic meeting on seeds, food and GMO-free regions”, 8 February 2006, European Parliament, Brussels, 5 pages, in English, French and Spanish. <http://www.bede-assoc.org>
- Friends of the Earth, “EU ‘Coexistence’ conference: Freedom of choice for whom? Friends of the Earth condemns Commission contamination policy”, press release, 3 April 2006. http://www.gmo-free-regions.org/Downloads/FOE_PR_Vienna_030406.pdf
- “Vienna Declaration for a GMO-free Europe”, issued by the March for a GMO-Free Europe, Vienna, 5 April 2006. <http://www.gmo-free-regions.org/fileadmin/files/ViennaDeclaration050406.pdf>
- Greenpeace, “Polish GE seed ban big step towards sustainable agriculture”, 18 May 2006. <http://www.greenpeace.org/international/press/releases/polish-ge-seed-ban>
- Greens/European Free Alliance biodiversity campaign: <http://www.eat-better.org>

