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EU caught in quandary over GMO animal feed imports

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BRUSSELS, Dec 7 (Reuters) - Europe faces a stark choice between empty supermarket shelves or feeding its animals so long as it keeps up a slow rate of approving new genetically modified (GMO) crops suitable for feed use, industry sources warn.

EU feedmakers have long complained of problems sourcing raw material, warning that the consequences of Europe's extreme caution and "zero tolerance" of unauthorised GMOs, even in tiny amounts, could be catastrophic for the food and feed sectors.

"Consumers may have to face empty shelves as certain food ingredients used in many processed foodstuffs ... could become unavailable," EU industry body FEFAC said on its website.

"EU livestock producers could be out of business overnight should soybean meal become unavailable due to the presence of such traces, with no alternative supplies," it said.

With world grain prices soaring and the EU's livestock and animal feed sectors facing supply shortages, pressure has mounted for the European Commission, the EU's executive arm, to do something about the speed at which the EU approves new GMOs.

Commission agriculture experts say the EU takes a minimum of 2.5 years, and often much longer, to complete new GMO approvals compared with an average of 15 months in the United States.

A main issue is that EU law allows no tolerance threshold for the accidental presence of unauthorised GMOs that have been approved in exporter countries. So trade flows can be disrupted by import bans if an EU-bound cargo is found to contain them.

Green groups, which are lobbying hard for the EU not to change its position on unauthorised GMOs, say such dire warnings are little more than industry scaremongering designed to push more biotech products onto European markets.

"The animal feed and biotech industries are deliberately spreading panic that the EU's tough GMO standards are threatening Europe's ability to feed its livestock," said Helen Holder of Friends of the Earth Europe.

"But these arguments are fatally flawed. The real reasons animal feeds are becoming scarce are that land is being used to grow agrofuels and countries such as China are increasing their consumption of meat," she said.

CHINA, BRAZIL KEY PLAYERS

Still, EU livestock producers do depend heavily on imported soy products -- beans, meal -- as a source of protein-rich and high-quality feed. Nearly all of it comes from Argentina, Brazil and the United States, the world's top three soybean producers. Since these countries mainly grow GMO varieties, non-biotech soy is becoming increasingly difficult to source and is also getting more expensive, particularly from Brazil.

With China emerging as a major soybean importer, Argentina and Brazil would become less reliant on European markets for their soybean production in future, EU Agriculture Commissioner Mariann Fischer Boel said recently in her website blog.

"China and other emerging countries are now also big importers and do not all share our hesitations about GMOs," she said, adding that many Argentine maize producers were switching to GMO types not authorised in Europe.

If this happened on a large scale, Brazil would become the EU's only significant non-GMO supplier. "And who knows how long the Brazilians would hold out?" she asked.

At present, Europe's animal industry is unaffected by what green groups call a loophole in EU law whereby meat and dairy products like milk and eggs deriving from animals fed with GMO material do not have to be labelled as GMO themselves.

CODEX PANEL MAY SET STANDARD

Europe has long been criticised by major GMO producers like the United States for its reluctance to embrace biotech foods.

No new GMOs have been approved for growing in EU countries since 1998, for example, in large part because of huge public resistance to what are sometimes called "Frankenstein foods".

Diplomats say the EU executive may now take its cue from the Codex Alimentarius Commission, an international panel set up in the 1960s to develop food standards and guidelines.

In September, Codex members agreed non-binding voluntary guidelines for evaluating the risk posed by low-level traces of GMOs approved in one country but not in another, with a database containing information on all GMOs approved in their countries.

Europe's biotech industry quickly seized on the Codex recommendation, saying it

hoped the EU would now revisit its "zero tolerance" policy and speed up the GMO approval processes.

"It's unrealistic to think Europe won't have some threshold on adventitious presence of unauthorised GMOs," one industry source said. "The world is not as it was five years ago, with India and China as major agricultural and trade players."

"Brazil is calling the EU's bluff as they know they've got a marketplace for their soy elsewhere; they know that China will buy it. So Europe is becoming isolated," he said. (Editing by Michael Roddy)

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