GM TRIAL SITE NOTIFICATIONS

Before granting consent for a deliberate release of a genetically modified plant for a trial, the regulatory authorities have to be satisfied that all appropriate measures will be taken to avoid adverse effects on human health and the environment which might arise from the deliberate release of the GMO in question during the trial.

The applicant has to provide information about the GM involved, the arrangements for the trial and an assessment of the impact on the environment. In most circumstances the location of the trial site is important for an understanding of the potential impact on the surrounding environment.

Under separate legislation all new varieties of major agricultural crops have to be tested and registered on the National List of seeds before they can go on sale to farmers. These trials involve growing new varieties in comparison with other varieties and undergoing a series of objective tests to ensure they offer farmers value for cultivation and use. All seeds, including GM seeds, have to undergo these National List Trials.

Over the past seven years, Bayer Crop Science (and its predecessor companies) submitted GM seeds for such trials. Many of the sites have been targeted by anti-GM activists and destroyed, thus preventing the authorities from collecting the required data.

This Autumn Bayer applied again for consent to conduct National List Trials on two varieties of the type of GM rape which had been grown in the farm-scale evaluations, but only gave notification of the counties in which the trials were planned to take place.

The Department sought advice from the Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment (ACRE) both on the application itself and the question of the level of detail required for the site notifications. The Committee considered this issue with respect to this particular application for small scale trials of this well characterised GM oilseed rape in terms of risk to human health and the environment. On this basis, the Committee was content that in terms of risk assessment notification of the county where sites were to be located was acceptable. However, the Committee emphasised that it had concerns with respect to openness and transparency, in particular the need to inform local interested parties of the location of the GM trials.

Having noted ACRE’s advice and their concerns about transparency the Secretary of State decided that notification at only county level was not appropriate and required Bayer to notified the specific site locations as in previous years, by four figure grid reference.

Consent was issued to Bayer on 25 September 2003 for National List Trials of oilseed rape on this basis (see condition 3b of the consent). Defra has since been informed by Bayer that the company will not be carrying out these particular trials in Autumn 2003 although the consent remains in effect until September 2006.

Defra
October 2003