

Protest against National Fund

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The National Fund is going to assess the benefits and risks of GE plants. A renown researcher of the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zürich (Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule Zürich, ETH) will be left out.

When on June 30 the National Fund informs about the new National Research Program (Nationales Forschungsprogramm, NFP), one researcher will not be present. Angelika Hilbeck of the Institute for Integrative Biologie of the ETH Zürich - an internationally acknowledged researcher in risk assessment of gene technology - is not going to take part in the NFP 59. During the next four years, this research program will assess the "benefits and risks of deliberate release of genetically engineered plants" in Switzerland.

Hilbeck coordinated a group of scientists from various Swiss research institutions who planned to give answers on still open questions concerning the deliberate release of genetically engineered plants: What, for example, is the fate of transgenes in the soil, how do they move from one plant to the next, and can different plants protect themselves differently against this flux of genes?

The applications of Hilbeck and her colleagues have been either bluntly rejected by the National Fund or have been cut down financially to such an extent that the researches have withdrawn them. Hardly any other previous research program is in the centre of public interest as the NFP 59. In November 2005, the Swiss people voted for a five-year moratorium on the commercial planting of genetically engineered plants.

The NFP 59 now could give answers on the fears and concerns of the critics of genetic engineering. It is still not yet decided how the NFP 59 will be structured and which researches will be supported with how much money. But it is certain that the submitted research proposals are exceeding the financial limit - 12 Million Swiss Francs (7.3 Mill EUR/9.8 Mill USD). Only 39 of the initially 92 research concepts sent in made it into the next round. The remaining concepts have been rejected already last November.

The absence of Hilbeck and her group in the NFP 59 is puzzling - especially in the light of the recent order of the German Federal Office of Consumer Protection and Food Safety (Bundesamtes für Verbraucherschutz und Lebensmittelsicherheit, BVL) which was made public last week. Due to this order, genetech-maize MON810 of the U.S. company Monsanto can only be grown commercially in Germany when

the effects of the cultivation will be monitored and examined scientifically.

In its letter to Monsanto the BVL points out that there are "legitimate reasons to assume" that the planting of MON810 would pose a "risk for the environment". Several scientific studies have been quoted accordingly - amongst them publications of Hilbeck and other researchers who cooperate closely with her. MON810 is a so-called Bt-maize. Due to a gene of the soil bacterium *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt), MON810 produces an insecticide that should fight pest insects as for example the corn borer.

In the letter, the BVL explains that "nontarget organisms of higher trophic levels of the food chain" are as well exposed to the toxin. Further more: "Currently, the effect and the live time of the plant-derived toxin in soil are unclear, they bear relatively high potentials for ecological effects". A monitoring should assess the effects of the toxin and the possible spread of the bacterial gene in the case of MON810. Amongst others, the German authorities cite the researcher from Zürich, when they write about the "risk for the environment" which would originate from the respective genetech-maize.

Ecologic cycles not yet understood

The Swiss National Fund can obviously ignore the expertise of Hilbeck, who since years fights against the attitude of many proponents of genetech to sweep the risks under the carpet. Upon request, the National Fund only explained that there is much experience with NFPs. And a scientifically "balanced program" had been developed. This would allow to answer the questions posed by the Federal Council [the Swiss Government].

Within the context of the NFP 59, Hilbeck and her colleagues planned to assess if a product of a bacterial gene that has been introduced into a plant is still active after it has passed the digestive tract of a sheep or pig and with the manure has reached the soil. Further more, they planned to find out what happens to the gene product in the soil afterwards. Deliberate releases with genetically engineered maize would have brought additional knowledge.

"These cycles have never been investigated comprehensively," states Hilbeck, only parts of its were known. "We have formed a team that unlike any other team in Switzerland could have investigated this problem in its entirety." All gained data would have been fed into a risk assessment model that has already been tested by the researchers in several countries. The development of this method has been funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and the Federal Office for the Environment with 2 Mill Francs (1.2 Mill EUR/1.6 Mill USD). In the context of the NFP 59, it should have been applied in Switzerland as well - so far the plans of the researchers.

But the National Fund obviously was of different opinion. With its decision, an internationally renowned risk assessment researcher has been excluded from the NFP 59. And even more: a researcher who participated in the set up of the aims of the research program.

Arbitrary reasons to reject?

Hilbeck is convinced that the decision of the prime Swiss research funding organization has nothing to do with science. "Apparently, other criteria which we were never told triggered the decision. It has never happened to me that a project has been shot down in such a way," Hilbeck says. Months ago, she explained in a protest letter to the National Fund that the reasons to reject the project were "arbitrary" and "a gut reaction", not being a "very scientific judgement". Other researchers also sent protest letters to the National Fund. They state for example that almost every point in the statement rejecting the project was either "demonstrably false" or "unhelpfully vague".

In two weeks, the NFP 59 will be presented to the public. If the winners of the moratorium initiative are as well of the opinion that the program is "balanced" is right now questionable - at least.

more information at:

NRP 59 - Benefits and Risks of the Deliberate Release of Genetically Modified Plants

http://www.snf.ch/E/targetedresearch/researchprogrammes/newNRP/Seite_n/_xc_nfp59.aspx

International Project on GMO Environmental Risk Assessment Methodologies

<http://www.gmo-guidelines.info/>