

Biotech Diplomacy: How US Embassies Are Pushing GMOs Throughout Europe

When you think of an embassy, you might think of diplomats dining with world leaders and consulate staffers assisting travellers who have lost their passports. Lately, however, ambassadors representing the United States have been carrying out a less traditional sort of mission in the European Union: promoting the interests of biotechnology companies and the genetically modified products they are attempting to sell around the world.

Throughout the EU, US diplomats have been pressuring members of parliaments, threatening trade retaliation and criticising scientific findings that question the safety of GMOs. As inappropriate as these tactics may seem, they are not isolated remarks blurted out accidentally. They are part of a coordinated effort by US diplomats to promote GMOs and belittle opponents of this technology as ignorant and against progress.

Seeking to overcome the growing international resistance to genetically modified foods, US embassies and ambassadors have spoken in support of GMOs in most countries that recently joined the EU. In the last six

years, the US diplomatic corps has taken the side of the biotech industry in Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Greece, Poland, Romania and Slovenia. US ambassadors stationed at the Vatican and in Japan have also championed GMOs.

These tactics appear to be working in some countries. The Czech Republic and Poland both significantly increased their acreage of GM corn in 2008. More than 170 Czech farmers planted GM corn on 8,380 hectares in 2008.¹ In Poland, farmers in the southwestern Opole region showed great interest in biotech corn after meeting American GM corn growers at an event sponsored by the US Embassy.²

Good Cops, Bad Cops

The manner in which American diplomats promote GMOs varies. It may take the form of mild scolding followed by heavy ammunition. This was the case in Croatia in 2002, when the country was working on a strict GMO regulation. The US Embassy in Zagreb criticised a draft version of the law as not scientifically grounded. This statement was followed by more serious indications that the US could ask the World Trade Organisation to protect its rights, claiming the draft violated WTO regulations on free trade.³

A much less polite strategy was employed in Cyprus when a proposed bill to require GM foods to be placed on separate supermarket shelves was discussed in summer 2005. According to the Green Party, which tabled the proposal in Cyprus' Parliament, the US Embassy in Nicosia sent a letter to Parliament members urging them to oppose the bill. "The bill is tantamount to a non-tariff barrier to trade in biotech goods and as such is in violation of your obligations as a member of the WTO," the letter warned. "It may also be inconsistent with your obligations as an EU member." The letter



went on to call the bill “a poke in the eye of the US, which is the leading developer and producer of agricultural biotech products.” Green Party member George Perdakis responded, “This is blackmail. It speaks of harming bilateral relations. It is very serious.”⁴ Although the European Commission rejected Cyprus’ proposal regarding supermarket shelves,⁵ Cypriots remain strongly opposed to GMOs.

Genetically modified foods and crops are also unwelcome in Greece, raising concerns within the US Embassy in Athens. According to Theodore Koliopanos, a legislator and former deputy environment minister, all political parties in the country are against GMOs, even though they have difficulty agreeing on every other issue. Koliopanos said that when Greece banned GMOs in 2005, biotech corporations reacted strongly. “The first visit any new minister in Greece gets is from the US ambassador saying, ‘You need to have GMOs,’” Koliopanos said. “The pressure is incredible.”⁶

In Bulgaria, the US Embassy is also keeping a watchful eye on issues surrounding biotechnology. In March 2004 embassy representatives attended a roundtable organised by the GMO-Free Bulgaria Coalition even though they were not invited. A year earlier US Ambassador James Pardew donated US\$10,000 to the Agro-BioInstitute in Bulgaria and emphasised the US government’s support for developing genetic engineering in the country.⁷



In Romania, the biotech lobby can count on the support of US Ambassador Nicholas Taubman, who has said EU regulations on GMOs are based on deception and prevent Romanians from profiting from biotechnology.⁸ At an embassy event in September 2007, Taubman introduced two American GMO promoters who tour the world preaching the virtues of GMOs: University of California biotechnology Professor Martina Newell-McGloughlin and farmer Curt Raasch. “The European Union is attached to 19th-century technologies and it will only lose because of that,” Newell-McGloughlin said at the event. “In case the EU develops a rational regulation frame[work], it would be helpful for a faster development of the technology worldwide.”⁹

In Slovenia, American diplomats have adopted more subtle approach. In 2007, the Institute of Sustainable Development organised a campaign against GMOs in connection with Earth Day. The goal was to stimulate public discussion, raise public awareness and influence politicians to take a stance against GMOs. The campaign resulted in over 40 Slovenian communities declaring themselves to be GMO-free in spring and summer 2007. The success of this endeavor was noticed by the US Embassy in Ljubljana, which responded by distributing a huge number of leaflets with Disney-style illustrations on the benefits of biotechnology in agriculture.¹⁰

Focusing on the positives of biotechnology is part of the campaign being led by the US Embassy in the Czech Republic, which is more receptive to GM crops than any other former Soviet bloc country. This has earned praise from US diplomats, who are making sure the country’s openness toward biotechnology is adequately appreciated. On 12 September 2007, officials from the US State Department, the US Embassy in Prague and US Department of Agriculture offices in Vienna and Prague put on a conference entitled “Biotechnology in Modern Agriculture, Food, and Industry.” The event was co-sponsored by the Czech Ministry of Agriculture. The conference attracted more than 70 participants from five EU countries, including representatives from the food production and retail industries, government officials, academics and journalists.

The conference was followed by a dinner for policy-makers hosted by US Ambassador Richard Graber. At the dinner, Czech Agriculture Minister Petr Gandalovic talked about difficulties his country is facing in expanding biotechnology, but ensured Americans in attendance that the country will continue its efforts. US Ambassador Richard W. Graber congratulated the Czechs on their leadership in the field.¹¹

In neighbouring Poland, the US Embassy is putting a positive spin on biotechnology by inviting farmers from abroad who grow GM crops. In May 2008 the embassy in Warsaw hosted Spanish farmer Jose Luis Romeo, who specialises in Monsanto-patented MON 810 corn.¹² The fact that the US Embassy rather than the Spanish Embassy would take an interest in Romeo’s farming experience may be puzzling, but this was not questioned



by the Polish mainstream media. Shortly after Romeo's visit, Eric Weinberg, agricultural counselor at the US Embassy in Warsaw, organised a visit of Iowa farmers who grow GM crops to the southwestern Polish region of Opole. The Americans tried to convince Polish farmers that GM corn can be profitable and is not a threat to biological diversity.¹³

When political and economic tactics to promote GMOs do not bring expected results, American diplomats hit religious notes and preach GMOs to men of cloth, in particular trying to win approval from the Catholic Church. In 2005, US Ambassador to the Holy See Francis Rooney urged Pope Benedict XVI to endorse biotechnology in agriculture. Rooney spoke of the "moral imperative" to explore the potential benefits of GMOs as a means to help feed impoverished nations. While the Pope remained careful not to take a position on the issue, cardinals including Renato Martino proved to be more open to the technology.¹⁴ About a year later, the US Embassy at the Vatican hosted three American researchers who specialise in agricultural biotechnology, including professors from Rutgers and Auburn universities, and organised their talks with Vatican officials on the role of GMOs in fighting world poverty and hunger.¹⁵

The US government used the same hunger-fighting rhetoric in April 2008 during the Life Science Summit in Tokyo. US Ambassador to Japan J. Thomas Schieffer said "biotech crops have potential to combat malnutrition and disease." He repeated the famously overplayed example of genetically modified "golden rice" that could allegedly prevent vitamin A deficiencies that cause childhood blindness. Scientists and civil society groups have long since debunked the myth, as children would have to eat enormous quantities of the rice to achieve any benefit.¹⁶

In his address, Ambassador Schieffer expressed his disappointment in Japanese consumers who feared biotech foods for "unknown" health effects. Two recent public opinion studies revealed that people in Japan "did not feel that biotechnology offered them any benefits." Schieffer found it even more worrisome that Japanese consumers were unaware that the government favored biotechnology. Schieffer went on to criticise Japanese government requirements that GMO foods be labeled, which has kept GM foods off of supermarket shelves. "So far," he said, "no Japanese food manufacturer or retailer has been willing to test the market for GMO-labeled, consumer-ready food."¹⁷

Ulterior Motives

Though questionable, these and other efforts by US diplomats are not surprising given they were orchestrated by Robert Zoellick, a former high-ranking foreign policy adviser to President George W. Bush and current president of the World Bank.

In January 2002, Zoellick, then the US Trade Representative, sent 14 pages of instructions to US ambassadors throughout the world claiming that proposed EU measures to trace and label GMOs "are not workable or enforceable, would be very expensive to implement, and would not achieve the stated objectives." According to Zoellick, who played a key role in the lengthy GMO dispute between the EU and the US, such measures would unduly impair trade in products already approved in the United States.¹⁸

Although Zoellick was ready to file a WTO case against the EU over its ban on GMOs in January 2003, the Bush administration postponed the case to avoid further antagonising European powers in light of the war in Iraq.¹⁹ While any such connection was denied by Peter Kurz,

the US diplomatic official for agricultural affairs in London,²⁰ the impression of a linkage was hard to shake off. The US eventually sued the EU – two weeks after Bush announced “Mission Accomplished” in Iraq.

Given the significant role of American diplomats in promoting genetic engineering throughout the world, it is difficult not to question their motives. The official story is that biotech crops can bring higher yields and therefore feed more people. But even though GM crops are widespread globally, they have not made a noticeable impact toward reducing malnutrition and starvation. Worse, in many cases GMOs have become the only crops offered as aid to countries with malnutrition problems. As American food aid often comes with strings attached, the US’s global support of GMOs places US food policy into a completely new light.



Further, given that many biotech companies are now struggling to develop new markets as they back away from markets that are drying up, it is difficult to ignore the likelihood that US diplomats are being used to drum up business for a select few companies that have very little impact on the broader US economy. Further, given the ongoing trade dispute between the US and EU, any European farmer who grows or promotes GMOs will become a de facto tool in US political ambitions.

Endnotes

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