

Dutch city of Nijmegen GE-free

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In the Netherlands, the Community Council of Nijmegen last night declared the city GE-free. After Culemborg and the province of Friesland, this is only the third GE-free region in the country, whose national government considers itself neutral as to GE agriculture, but is seen as a staunch supporter of it by industry, other governments and civil society alike.

The city of Culemborg declared itself GE-free in 2004, but after that no Dutch region was added to the growing movement of GE-free regions in Europe for a long time. Last January, however, the province of Friesland followed, declaring that it would refuse both commercial GE crops and field trials until a debate between farmers, politicians and experts would allow the provincial administration to take a final position on the issue. Both in Culemborg and Friesland, the initiative came from the green party, GroenLinks. In Nijmegen, however, a group of citizens started in 2009 to inform themselves and hold debates with farmers, shopkeepers and citizens. The group, calling itself "[Citizens for GE-free food](#)", wanted to raise awareness on GE in food and agriculture. Awareness was exactly what was missing among local politicians as well as citizens upon an earlier attempt in 2003 by Milieudefensie (the Dutch branch of Friends of the Earth) to have Nijmegen declared GE-free.

The "Citizens for GE-free food" put a lot of work into it and came up with a Citizens' Initiative. In Nijmegen (a city of 164.000 inhabitants), this instrument requires 100 signatures to put an issue on the agenda of the Community Council. The group collected 4000 signatures and handed in their Initiative to the Community Council last April. The Initiative requested the Community Council to tackle the issue in four steps:

- 1 make a statement in the press declaring the city GE-free, referring to the citizens' objections listed in the initiative, and send this statement to the national government and the national parliament;
- 2 get legal advice on the options available to local authorities within the framework of the EU Directive 2001/18, to protect regular and organic agriculture from undesired GMO presence;
- 3 communicate the citizens' concerns on GMO safety to companies wishing to start field trials within the community;
- 4 draw up a formal Note on Sustainability setting out a community policy for this, based on more than just the national guidelines on sustainability and including the notion "GE-free".

After intensive lobbying by the group and two debates in the Council, last night a 23 to 16 majority of the Council voted in favor of accepting the Citizens' Initiative. The green party, the socialist party, the social democrats and the United Senior Party voted in favor; the liberals, the Christian democrats, the liberal democrats (D66) and two local parties voted against. The decision ignored an earlier advice by the city's administration (mayor and aldermen) to reject the Initiative; this negative advice is thought to have been prompted by the presence of D66 in the local governing coalition with the greens and the social democrats.

The "Citizens for GE-free food" will now continue and advise the Council on carrying out the four points of the Initiative.

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