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Giant in genetic engineering stung by bees

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European Court of Justice with groundbreaking decision in the interest of European consumers

Honey must be protected against pollution with pollen from genetically modified organisms

Food is considered genetically modified food in the sense of European genetic engineering law even if it contains only tiny traces of genetically modified organisms and must therefore not be marketed without a special safety control and approval. With its decision dating from September 6, 2011, the European Court of Justice clearly ruled in favour of European consumers as well as that of beekeepers. If their honey contains pollen from genetically modified (GM) crops, beekeepers are forced to destroy it. So far, they haven't had any chance to be protected from genetic engineering in the vicinity of their beehives nor to get a compensation for their economic loss. Now it's like David beating Goliath. Moreover, the judgment could cause many import honeys and other food to disappear from the shelves in European supermarkets.

Prior to the current decision was a legal battle going on for years. The lawsuit was initiated by the German Alliance for the Protection of Bees Against Genetic Engineering in Agriculture. The decision does not only concern honey, but comestibles in general throughout the European Union. According to the European Court of Justice, the strict standards now required are necessary to protect people's health from the so far unknown risks of genetic engineering. People in Germany as well as in Europe take a clear position against genetic

engineering, too: In a recent survey made by the German Bundesamt für Naturschutz (Federal Agency for Nature Conservation), 87 per cent of all Germans clearly voted against genetic engineering in agriculture. They would even like its being completely prohibited.

Honey has long and rightfully been considered a very healthy and natural product. However, it has been endangered ever since the first fields with genetically modified crops like corn or rapeseed were allowed for test purposes. Bees don't make any difference between blooms from natural and from genetically modified crops when they collect their pollen and nectar. As a result, beekeeper Karl Heinz Bablok from the south German town of Augsburg took all of his honey to the local waste combustor in the autumn of 2009 – all because the Free State of Bavaria had planted a field with the Monsanto corn MON 810 close to his beehives. Monsanto is one of the biggest enterprises in genetic engineering. MON 810 contains an insecticide that caused a quarrel on its environmental impact between the German Federal Ministry of Consumer Protection, Food and Agriculture and Monsanto enterprise. If beekeeper Bablok had sold or even given away his honey for free, this would have been an offence against the law. Several German courts clearly saw the problem, but still would not grant him protection against contamination with genetically modified organisms. Thanks to the financial and organisational support from the German Alliance for the Protection of Bees against Genetic Engineering in Agriculture, he now succeeded at the European Court of Justice – a success that should be very much welcome to all consumers in Europe.

The Alliance was initiated by Thomas Radetzki, manager of Mellifera e. V., an ecologically orientated beekeepers' association located in Rosenfeld in southern Germany. Apart from Mellifera, members of the Alliance are the German Association of Professional Beekeepers (Deutscher Berufs- und Erwerbsimkerbund), the German Beekeepers' Association (Deutscher Imkerbund), Demeter, Bioland, the Association for Producers of Ecological Food (Assoziation ökologischer Lebensmittelhersteller) and the Association of Ecological Food Industry (Bund Ökologischer Lebensmittelwirtschaft). Radetzki's satisfied comment on the court's decision: „The small bee showed that it has a sting it can use – even against a giant in genetic engineering. Consumers have every reason to share our happiness about this groundbreaking decision! Now it is up to the Federal Government to act instead of blaming the European commission for the poor consumer protection. Chancellor Mrs. Merkel and Minister Mrs. Aigner now have to make sure that the regulation on the production of genetically modified crops dating from 2008 will get an effective

addition concerning beekeepers' protection. Moreover, trade must take conspicuous honey from the shelves, and the Federal States must see to an effective food control."

Currently German law prohibits marketing MON 810 Bt maize. At the same time, Monsanto wants to obtain its readmission in Germany. Luckily, the man in the street can very well fight for his interests by cooperating with others – just like bees in their hives do.

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