

PERSPECTIVES

INTERVIEW

“We need a European lobby for GMOs”

▶ It's hard to be a pro-GMO campaigner in Italy. Since 2001, the regions there have not implemented the plans for coexistence that were suggested by a ministerial decree in 2001. Instead, there was a de facto Italian moratorium on GM crops for nine years. The first cracks appeared in 2010, when the country's federal court, the Consiglio di Stato, backed a complaint filed by Silvano Dalla Libera, the Vice President of the Futuragra farmers' association. That decision was quickly overturned by then Minister for Agriculture Luca Zaia. Giancarlo Galan, who wants to restart research on GMOs, has now taken Zaia's place, but new dangers lurk in Brussels. Health Commissioner John Dalli would like to give national governments the right to decide on GMO cultivation. Futuragra wants to avert that. EB-SIN spoke to the GMO proponent about his expectations for the future.



Silvano dalla Libera is a maize farmer who runs a farm in Vivaro in the Friuli region of northern Italy. In 2004, dalla Libera co-founded Futuragra, a cultural organisation that promotes the use of innovative technologies in farming in general and biotechnology in particular. In June, he met EU representatives in Brussels in an attempt to modify the nationalisation of GMO-cultivation guidelines that have been proposed by EU Health and Consumer Policy Commissioner John Dalli.

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Signor Dalla Libera, in June you went to Brussels with a Futuragra delegation to protest John Dalli's plans for the nationalisation of GMO cultivation...

DALLA LIBERA:

We met with representatives from different EU bodies, among them the President of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development of the European Parliament, Paolo de Castro, and representatives from the cabinet of Manuel Barroso. For all of them, we had the same message: the Dalli proposal is a proposal against a unified Europe, because it will create different conditions all over Europe.

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How come?

DALLA LIBERA:

It will not only lead to disadvantages for many farmers in relation to their European colleagues, but also make Europe vulnerable to agricultural GMO-imports from countries outside the EU. In a recession like this, we need more Europe – not less. We feel the Commission should be consistent. If it

creates new economic differences, it should be ready to compensate farmers for loss of income. We want to establish an observing body to evaluate the damage done to the Italian economy by the ban on GMOs. At the moment, some estimates place the damages at about €1bn or more over the last 10 years.

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What else are you doing at the national level?

DALLA LIBERA:

We believe in courts, not in Italian politicians. We have appealed the decree issued by Luca Zaia. So we are once again asking the Consiglio di Stato to lift the ministerial ban. We expect a decision in July. At the European level, we have appealed to the European Commission, because we argue that Italy is infringing on European laws with its reluctance to implement the coexistence rules. But former Environmental Commissioner Stavros Dimas blocked everything. John Dalli recently sent an answer saying he will look into it again. Back at the national level, Giancarlo Galan appears to be more positive regarding GMOs than Zaia, who was fundamentally opposing them. Galan recently gave some hints that experimental research on GMOs could be revitalised. Now he has to deliver, and approve working guidelines for open-space experiments.

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But does Italy have the scientific backbone to conduct leading research?

DALLA LIBERA:

Up to 2001, there were about 250 open-space experiments with genetically engineered plants underway in Italy. Italy was one of the first three countries worldwide to start these experiments. None of these led to problems with contamination or security. At the moment, just one or two projects are still running, and they will be concluded soon. This is a disgrace for a developed country.

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Local Italian media reported that a farmer illegally planted some GM maize near Pordenone. Do you know anything about that?

PERSPECTIVES

DALLA LIBERA:

We are not in any way involved in the Porde-none planting. I think it is an act of desperation. I understand it, but I don't approve of it. We've chosen to go through the courts.

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But if Dalli has his way, the Italian government might soon be able to impose a ban legally. Then the courts won't help anymore.

DALLA LIBERA:

That's right. But as I said, we don't believe in politicians, but in farmers and consumers. In the long run, they will decide. According to a survey in March of 2009, 53% of the farmers in the Veneto and Friuli districts said they would like to plant GM maize. 35% of consumers are also already willing to buy it, and this percentage will rise when public communication about GMOs is based on scientific facts, and not on campaigns about "Frankenstein food". We need a common



Giancarlo Galan is Italy's minister for agriculture. He has talked about the resumption of GMO research in Italy.

agricultural policy in Europe that includes GMOs as a means of production.

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Futuragra is an Italian organisation. How do you want to have an European impact?

DALLA LIBERA:

Europe needs a strong lobby of farmers arguing for balanced communication about

GMOs. One of our main goals in the near future is to establish European contacts. We already have ties to Spanish and Romanian agricultural groups. The next step would be the establishment of a European umbrella group of GMO advocates modeled after Futuragra.

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What's your motivation when arguing in favor of GMOs?

DALLA LIBERA:

GM crops are good for the environment. They are healthier, and they provide an economic opportunity. But another issue is even more important. Freedom is the main force behind both the economy and society – especially in Italy. Business productivity was the reason for the Italian boom after the war. Now everything is blocked by excessive bureaucracy. I want to break that blockade. ◀

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