

## Press Release

### **The Vienna conference on co-existence pays lip service to ‘freedom of choice’**

Vienna, 7th April 2006 - The “Freedom of Choice” conference on co-existence, organised by the European Commission and the Austrian Presidency of the EU, has not born fruit, to the regret of the Assembly of European Regions (AER). Following our meeting at the end of March with European Commissioner Mariann Fischer Boel, we expected more from this event. However, once at the conference, we simply realised that even the Commissioners concerned disagreed on the approach to be adopted on the basis of the opinion of the European Food Security Authority, namely: when it comes to authorising a specific product, is this merely an economic problem or also an environmental and health issue? Furthermore, the debate was distorted from the very beginning, due to the divergence in views on how to define co-existence and what thresholds should be introduced for labelling. These differences hinder any significant progress in regulating GMO crops.

The AER is not hiding from the truth: the existence of GMOs in Europe is today a reality which no one can deny. We insist however that guarantees must be put into place immediately, namely the application of the precautionary and polluter-pays principles and the adoption of common European rules, so that the regions can preserve their traditional agriculture. Leaving it up to Member States to individually decide what rules should be applied is definitely not a viable solution. Cross-contamination does not distinguish between national policies, on the contrary it can span the entire European continent!

The European Union should be more attentive to citizens’ concerns. Let us not forget that almost 70% were against the introduction of GMOs. The Vienna initiative could have been a success, as all participants contributed to a fruitful debate. Unfortunately, the Commission was not very present during the debates, despite its well-publicised wish to move towards more communication, transparency and democracy. In the end, this conference proved to be a closed event: for example, only two regions were officially invited to take the floor.

On a more positive note, however, during the March European Environmental Council, a number of Ministers criticised the current procedure for authorising GMOs and it was decided to improve this process in the coming months. We therefore congratulate the Austrian EU Presidency for its open approach to this issue.

The AER will closely monitor the progress of the European institutions and will continue its campaign for the adoption of common rules on co-existence. It will also increase its support for quality and organic agriculture, through the promotion of regional quality labels.

*The Assembly of European Regions/AER is the political organisation of Regions in Europe and their spokesperson at European and international level. Its vocation is to defend the Regions' interests in the political process and develop interregional cooperation. AER brings together 255 Regions from 30 European Countries and 13 interregional organisations.*

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