

Appeal

Responsible Science for Sustainable Food

To adhere to this appeal, please see the note at the bottom (*)

A national debate promoted by the ITALIAEUROPA – LIBERI DA OGM Coalition will be held between September 15 and November 15, 2007. This event aims to bring citizens back to the heart of decision-making. All the players in Italy's agrifood system – organizations for agriculture and artisanship, small and mid-sized businesses, mass distribution, consumer associations, environmental groups and international organizations – are going to reach out together to establish a *common ground*. In the context of this event, they will open a dialogue with citizens on “food quality and sustainability.”

This debate cannot exclude the support of all scientists and researchers who understand the value of sustainability for scientific and technological innovation. This represents a crucial issue in the agricultural sector. European agriculture is facing an increasingly critical situation, which requires rational and informed political and economic decisions as well as scientific and technological countermeasures. Two glaring examples of this are the effects of climate change and the urgent measures established by the Kyoto Protocol, with the challenges these pose for European agriculture. Similarly, the EU directive on nitrates (91/676/CEE) mandates reductions in the use of synthetic fertilizers and fluids from zootechnical sources, requiring the agricultural sector to respect strict limits. Successfully addressing these challenges depends squarely on the ability to implement innovations that are sustainable and that also meet environmental standards.

In Italy, the development of the agrifood system must take some essential elements into consideration. In the vast majority of cases, the dimension of Italy's typical agricultural enterprise is limited by the morphology of the geographical territory and the nation's socioeconomic history. Thus, Italy has no chance of competing on the *quantity* side of production, with low profit margins, yet it can and must compete on the *quality* side, which can guarantee high profit margins, especially in the export market. Evidence for the accuracy of this assessment comes from the increasing demand on the part of European citizens and Italians themselves for genuine foods and local specialties.

Based on these premises, the economic, environmental and social costs of this kind of agriculture - increasingly dependent on oil, the chemical industry and patents - would be huge and unjustifiable. Moreover,

genetically modified crops are not cost-effective. Advanced studies in the economics of agricultural production show that transgenic agriculture doesn't pay: its cost/benefit ratio is similar to that of traditional agriculture. In addition, the range of markets open to transgenic agricultural products is smaller than the one for traditional agriculture, because of the reluctance shown by consumers towards these products.

Beyond economic analysis, evaluations of agricultural policy should take into consideration the obligation to respect the Precautionary Principle – as specified by international law and the EU Treaty – in order to avoid potential risks related to GMOs. To this regard, this appeal adheres to the principles presented by the Italian Ecological Society (*Società Italiana di Ecologia*) in the document *Scienza e Ambiente 2002* (downloadable at www.dsa.unipr.it/site).

The special nature of the traditions and resources of the European agroalimentary system already contains a substantial part of the innovative potential needed for the system's recovery. The advisability of exploiting this potential in order to consolidate sustainable processes and production chains is obvious to everyone involved. In the short run, therefore, it is crucial to draw on every useful competence and innovation in order to preserve and improve the *diversity* of local products in their territories of origin. For example, it is possible to use innovative technologies aimed at genetic improvements that do not involve genetic engineering, in order to allow agricultural varieties to express features developed in harmony with their environment. Investment in advanced scientific and technological research cannot be put off either, because the damage brought about by climate change will soon require the development and implementation of measures designed to conserve water, energy and chemical treatments used in the production process.

In Italy and Europe, many of the resources and skills needed to achieve these goals already exist. However, it is now time to translate them into system programming and efficiency. The aim must be the reconstruction of a strong social pact regarding food security and healthy nutrition, in order to define a realistic *model of development* that will be advantageous to present and future producers and consumers. If developed in the context of the EU, this model would trigger a concrete improvement in the quality of community policies that are of great interest to citizens.

Italy and Europe now face a choice between the large-scale profits of a handful of multinational enterprises and the interests of the entire population. The scientific community – regardless of cultural and

disciplinary differences – has a particular responsibility for influencing this choice. In fact, to sign the appeal *Responsible Science for Sustainable Food* is largely an expression of scientific and social civility. It is a simple act that brings scientists back to their fundamental role in social emancipation.(*)

(*) To adhere to the appeal you must send an e-mail to one of the following addresses:

modonesi@fondazionedirittigenetici.org

c.scaffidi@slowfood.it

You need to type “appeal adhesion” (or “adesione appello”) into the subject, and include the following data in the body of the message:

- name and last name
- qualification
- agency/company of affiliation
- city
- e-mail

Personal information will be used exclusively for the adhesion to this appeal and treated in accordance with privacy regulations.