

Novel foods and novel food ingredients

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The European Parliament/Council conciliation committee managed to conclude negotiations on novel foods and novel food ingredients. This agreement was described as "historic" by both delegations. Until now, the committee had only approved directives and programmes. As a result, novel foods and novel food ingredients such as genetically modified soya beans, sugar beet and tomatoes can be eaten without risk and are environmentally-friendly and correctly labelled. European procedures were adopted for marketing these products on the Community market. Without these, differences between national legislations would have hampered the free movement of these foodstuffs and constituted an obstacle to the internal market. Genetic modification is used mainly to influence taste or shelf life or to protect products against insects or pesticides. The European Parliament rapporteur, Mrs Dagmar ROTH-BEHRENDT (PSE, D) welcomed the agreement concluded last night under the codecision procedure which, she felt, would allow suitable legislation to be adopted within a reasonable period of time in the interests of European consumers. The urgency was all the greater as genetically modified foods were expected to start inundating the Community market at any moment. Under the terms of the agreement, the Council incorporated in full 3 of the 6 amendments adopted by the European Parliament at second reading of the proposal for a regulation of 12 March 1996. In doing so, the Council: - agreed that the regulation would enter into force 90 days after its publication in the Official Journal instead of the twelve months initially proposed in the common position of 23 October 1995; - agreed that novel foods which satisfied the conditions which allow them to be rapidly placed on the market (i.e. for which no further evaluation is necessary) must nonetheless comply with the labelling requirements in the regulation. A compromise was reached on the other three amendments. - All foodstuff labelling should inform the consumer of the characteristics or properties which, on the basis of a scientific evaluation, render a novel food or novel food ingredient different from an existing product. The label should also indicate the presence of genetically modified organisms. - Exceptionally, Parliament has made a concession to the Council over supplies in bulk. This means that labelling of foodstuffs or food ingredients provided to the final consumer which may contain both genetically modified products and conventionally produced products should only indicate that such genetically modified organisms may be present. In exchange, the Council agreed to grant suppliers the right to inform the consumer that a specific foodstuff or food ingredient is not a novel food and was not produced by means of the specific novel-food techniques. - Parliament prevailed upon the Council to withdraw from its common position a provision to exclude from the scope of the regulation genetic modifications limited to the agricultural characteristics of a product, e.g. where they improve a plant's resistance to rain, but where the resultant food product is not affected. The conciliation committee was jointly chaired by Mr Josep VERDE I ALDEA (PSE, E), vice-president of the European Parliament and Mr Jimmy DEENIHAN, Irish secretary of state (agriculture, forests and food). In the final stage of the legislative procedure, the text adopted by the conciliation committee still needs to be approved by the Council (by a qualified majority) and by the European Parliament (by a simple majority).