

Contained use of genetically modified micro-organisms GMM (amend. Directive 90/219/EEC)

1995/0340(SYN) - 26/02/1997

The Committee wants to enhance safety aspects of a Commission proposal on genetically modified micro-organisms (GMMs), which include the Aids and Ebola viruses. GMMs, which also include salmonella and rickettsia, are important tools of biotechnology. Some can produce useful substances, such as human insulin. On the other hand, an accidental release of GMMs into the environment could jeopardize whole ecosystems. The Commission proposal is for a Council Directive amending Directive 90/219/EEC on the contained use of GMMs, ie their use within an enclosed area (eg specially insulated laboratories). The committee adopted a number of amendments on safety tabled by the rapporteur, Mr Antonios TRAKATELLIS (EPP, Gr), who stressed the need to learn from the BSE crisis. One of these placed GMMs in separate graded categories according to health risk. This will give the general public protection equivalent to that already afforded to biotechnology workers. It will also help the industry by removing any doubt about the category to which a particular GMM belongs so that there is no uncertainty about what precautions must be taken. The committee also adopted an amendment by the rapporteur to the effect that a contained environment must prevent, not simply limit (as the Commission had proposed), contact between GMMs and the general population and the environment. However, the committee rejected many amendments which it considered were too stringent and likely to act as an unnecessary bureaucratic break on industry's freedom to experiment. The committee's report (first reading) was adopted under the cooperation procedure (Article 130s of the EC Treaty). However, against the Commission's wishes, the committee accepted Mr Trakatellis's argument - subject to agreement by the Legal Affairs Committee - that the legal basis should be changed to 100a (codecision procedure), which will give Parliament more clout. The committee also want the proposed directive to be monitored by a management committee rather than a regulatory committee. This will give more leeway to Parliament and the Commission vis-a-vis the Council. The aim of other amendments adopted by the committee, is for GMM users to take out adequate accident insurance and for the disposal of GMMs to be taken into account when assessing risks. The public should be better informed. Users must keep appropriate records and a register of serious accidents needs to be compiled.