Life sciences and biotechnology: a strategy for Europe

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The committee adopted the report by Elisa DAMIÃO (PES, P) welcoming the Commission's strategy for life sciences and biotechnology. It wanted to see a specific political agenda for the next few years in the field of biotechnology, along with efforts to convince the public of the opportunities offered by biotechnology, not only in the field of medicine but also in sectors such as agriculture, industry and alternative energy. The report then looked at the various 'strands' that the strategy would involve and made a series of recommendations: - Member States should improve education in the field of biology in general so that consumers can take informed decisions; - given that the cautious attitude of consumers towards GMOs was largely attributable to insufficient provision of information about GMO technology, there should be improved public information and debate in the field of biotechnology; - the precautionary principle should be applied in a rational manner so as to provide consumer and environmental protection, while not serving as a barrier to political decision-making and technological innovation; - as regards international cooperation, biotechnology, if applied prudently, could contribute towards finding genuine solutions to problems such as sustainable development and food sufficiency. Developing countries themselves must decide if and to what extent they want to use GMOs, and technology transfer should be one of the preconditions for sustainable development; - regarding legislation, there was a need for a harmonised ethical legal framework for biotechnology companies and farmers and for the introduction of a European patent which meets the requirements of researchers and innovators in both public research institutes and industry; - as regards R&D and the business environment, the EU should continue research into the development of foodstuffs that are beneficial to consumers and into the improvement of risk assessment. SMEs should be given easier access to innovation, training and risk capital and active support should be provided for the setting up of bio-clusters; - concerning the environment and agriculture, there should be support for research into biotechnology uses offering clear social or environmental benefits. Legislation on fuels should be reviewed to enable products from biological energy sources to be placed on the market in the short term. There should also be an end to the existing de facto moratorium on GM foods in order to increase consumer choice and benefits and to promote innovation. At the same time, the committee wanted products to be clearly and unambiguously labelled and traceability to be ensured; - on health and reproductive medicine, the Commission should come up with a proposal on the introduction of a standard for genetic tests, ensuring that they were conducted under clear rules covering medical, ethical, social, psychological and legal aspects. Genetic testing data should remain confidential and should be used only for the benefit of the person requiring such tests, with the exception of tests undertaken for clearly defined scientific or criminal investigation purposes. The committee also wanted to see an EU-wide regulation on DNA-testing, with a legal basis which left Member States free to introduce more stringent protection measures. Finally, it stressed that no woman should be compelled to have prenatal diagnosis and that determination of sex in connection with prenatal diagnosis should only be permitted if there is a risk of serious gender-specific hereditary diseases.