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EU OKs more genetically modified corn

***by* Bridget Macdonald**
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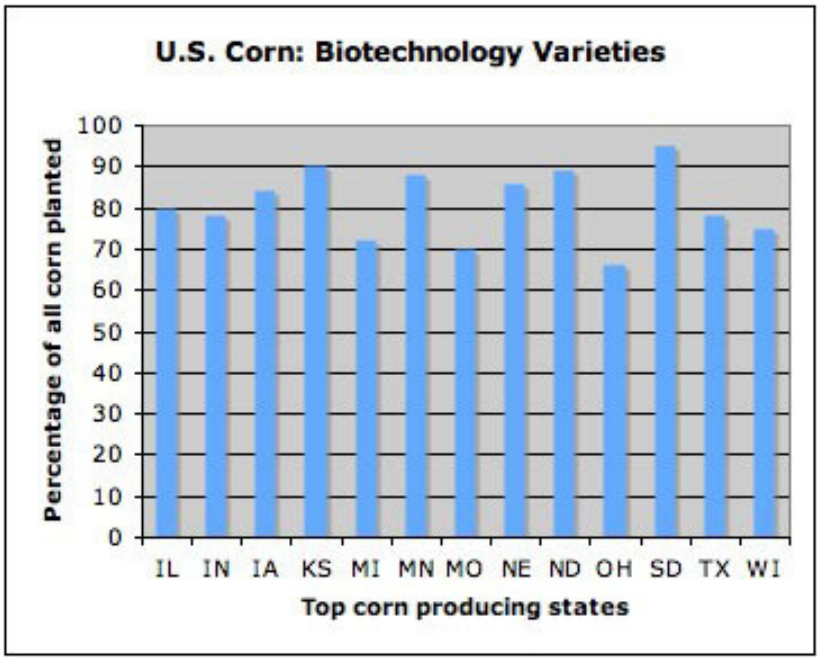
The European Union Commission recommended Wednesday that farmers be allowed to plant two new varieties of genetically modified corn, an endorsement that if approved, could ease restrictions against U.S. corn and corn traits.

The EU Commission's recommendation breaks ground for use of Bt-11, developed by Syngenta AG, and TC-1507, developed by a joint venture between Pioneer Hi-Bred International, a subsidiary of DuPont Co., and Mycogen Seeds, a unit of Dow Chemical Co. The EU has not allowed the cultivation of any new genetically modified crops since it approved a strain of corn developed by Monsanto Co. in 1998.

Genetically modified corn accounted for 80 percent of all the corn planted in both the U.S. and in the state of Illinois in 2008, up from 73 and 74 percent respectively in 2007, according to Mark Schleusener, a statistician for the Illinois Department of Agriculture.

The nod from Europe is a step in the right direction, according to Mark Lambert of the Illinois Corn Growers Association. Although there is government support for genetically modified crops in the U.S., "[the EU] has been using biotech as a false barrier to trade," he said. Approval from the EU Commission will open the doors for American corn, which Lambert said is essential to meet global food demand. The EU accepts some corn from the United States, but only for use as animal feed, not for human consumption. Any processed food containing genetically modified corn must be clearly marked.

"If something is labeled GMO, it's a death sentence," said Dr. Marty Sachs, a research geneticist at the Maize Genetic Stock Center. For the EU, "the issue is mostly protectionist rather than scientific or safety. [The EU] would like to keep our technology and companies from infringing upon theirs," he said.



Bridget Macdonald/Medill

In 2008, the majority of corn planted in the United States was from genetically modified seed, including herbicide and insecticide resistant varieties, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Sachs theorized that the E U Commission has "erred on the side of caution" in the wake of food scares, such as mad cow disease, but said there is nothing dangerous about genetically modified corn.

Geneticists developed Bt strains of corn using protein from a soil-born bacterium that occurs throughout the world, Sachs said. The protein has insecticidal properties. "When you have a caterpillar munching on the leaves, they ingest it and it kills them," he said, adding that Bt's toxicity is specific to certain pest insects and is innocuous when consumed by other animals.

"Organic farmers use Bt as a spray on their crops," Sachs said. "It enables farmers to grow corn without using harsher insecticides or chemicals."

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service oversees the approval of genetically modified crops in the United States using tests that Sachs called "reasonable" compared to the EU's strict standards. U.S. breeders must demonstrate that their crops are as safe as a conventional equivalent through a process he said takes only a couple of years.

Despite the apparent backing of the EU Commission, Lambert said suspicion of genetically modified crops is embedded in European culture and will be hard to overcome. But he said biotechnology has done a lot for the environment by significantly reducing the tonnage of pesticides used in agriculture, a factor that might help win over the "green" mentality that has become prevalent abroad.

Illinois, which vies with neighboring Iowa for the No. 1 ranking in U.S. corn production according to the USDA, would reap the benefits of a more lenient agricultural policy abroad. "If they have actually accepted that farmers can grow these crops in Europe, it will prevent them from using that standard to bar importing products with same traits," Sachs said.

From a global perspective, the EU Commission's decision is good news for farmers around the world, who Lambert said have been at a serious disadvantage.

"A lot of countries don't have the agencies and watchdog groups we do to ensure proper testing is done. In lieu of having expertise, they look to the U.S. or the EU," he said.