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Europe Defends Stance on Genetically Altered Foods

By PAUL MELLER

BRUSSELS, Feb. 8 - The European Commission defended its current practices on screening genetically altered foods in the wake of a report from the World Trade Organization that criticized its past action in restricting the entry of modified products into the European Union.

The W.T.O. report, which was leaked to the news media Tuesday night, drew sharp criticism from environmental groups, which contend that the European Union's rules on biotechnology are too lax and that health safeguards are not a trade issue. The commission held back from being too specific in its remarks, as the report remains confidential and, at 1,050 pages, will take some time to digest.

The preliminary report, which examined practices from 1998 to 2003, found that some countries in the European Union went beyond the union's rules in keeping out genetically modified crops. The report also said the European Union had kept some products out by deliberately failing to approve them quickly enough. The delays amounted to a de facto moratorium, the W.T.O. said - a point the commission disputes.

Peter Power, the spokesman for European Union-wide trade issues at the European Commission, played down the relevance of the report on Wednesday. Since 2004, the European Union has accelerated its approval process for genetically modified products and has cleared nine such products for import.

"It is largely of historical interest," he said of the report, adding that it "will not alter the system within which the European Union takes decisions on G.M.O.'s," or genetically modified organisms.

But Friends of the Earth, a leading environmental group, described the report as "an inappropriate intrusion into decisions about what food people eat." Adrian Bebb, a campaigner on genetically altered foods at Friends of the Earth Europe, said, "The W.T.O. has bluntly ruled that European safeguards should be sacrificed to benefit biotech corporations."

The commission, the executive body of the 25-member European Union, reacted angrily to the remarks, according to one person familiar with thinking in its trade department. "They are misleading people," he said, asking not to be named because the W.T.O. report is still confidential.

"The system is working. The science is sound," that person said. "The approval process and the consumer safety standards applied in the union may be more stringent than in the United States, but G.M.O. imports to the union are rising, especially from competitive exporters like Brazil."

National governments around the European Union, however, were more circumspect.

"The protection of people and the environment have absolute priority, and the most recent scientific research vindicates our cautious approach in this matter," Maria Rauch-Kallat, Austria's health minister, told the Reuters news agency. "We will exhaust all possibilities to keep Austria's agriculture G.M.-free and ensure consumers' safety." Austria, along with France, Greece, Germany, Italy and Luxembourg, has stricter limits than the European Union itself.

Meanwhile, Europe's biotechnology industry said Wednesday it supported the commission's new approach to genetically modified foods, which rests on scientific testing and labeling. "The European biotechnology industry, like the European Commission, supports choice - the choice to grow, import and consume approved G.M. products," EuropaBio, a trade group, said in a statement. Responding to questions prompted by the leaking of the W.T.O. report, the United States trade representative, Rob Portman, said the facts about genetically altered foods were "clear and compelling."

"It is safe and beneficial technology that is improving food security and helping to reduce poverty worldwide," Mr. Portman said. He added, "We believe agricultural biotechnology products should be provided a timely, transparent and scientific review by the European Union, and that is why Canada, Argentina and the United States brought the case in the first place."