

# Europe set to lift ban on GM crops

The European commission is about to give the go-ahead to the first commercially grown genetically modified crops since a public outcry nine years ago halted their cultivation, writes Jonathan Leake.

The commission has begun the final approval stages for at least four applications by biotech companies to let farmers grow GM potatoes and maize in British and European fields.

The first crop is expected to be given the go-ahead by the end of this month. "We hope that it will have been approved . . . so that it will be ready for planting next year," said a spokesman for BASF, the German company that created the potato.

Such a move could reignite the pan-European backlash against GM crops of the late 1990s, which forced the European Union to impose an effective moratorium on the crops in 1998.

Since then no crops have been approved for cultivation, although permission has been given to import some varieties for animal feed.

However, it has now emerged that dossiers on another three crops, all modified forms of maize, are being prepared by the commission, which will recommend they be approved for cultivation.

They could be given the green light in time for next year's planting season. Applications for other crops, including rapeseed, are in the pipeline.

The acceleration of the process for approving GM crops follows mounting pressure from the American government. It has accused the EU of blocking free trade and threatened to take Europe to the World Trade Organisation.

A commission spokesman said: "All the crops being recommended for approval have been scientifically assessed by the European Food Safety Authority. If the science supports the application we have no grounds for rejecting it."

The GM potato produced by BASF has novel mixtures of starch and would be grown purely for industrial uses such as making paper, not human consumption.

Most of the other GM crops under consideration by the commission are, however, designed for food or animal feed and are not very different to those that sparked the original consumer backlash.

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