

International Attuning Assortment, Supply and Demand of Organic Seed

ECO-PB is going to hold an international meeting on the use of organic seed in organic vegetable production. The meeting takes place at the Bejo head office in Warmenhuizen (NL) and starts on 25 September 2008, one o'clock pm and ends on the 26 September at lunch time.

For further information and registration visit the ECO-PB Web page:
www.eco-pb.org/00/registration.htm.

ECO-PB Board re-elected at the General Assembly

Attached to IFOAM Conference in Modena (Italy) ECO-PB held its General Assembly. Besides the members of ECO-PB there were quite a lot of observers attending the GA and interested in the work of ECO-PB. The president of ECO-PB, Edith Lammerts van Bueren, presented the annual report on the activities of ECO-PB in 2007 (see http://www.eco-pb.org/09/annual_report_2007.pdf) and chaired the lively discussion that was mainly dedicated to the motions on protoplast fusion and organic breeding standards that were to be presented in the IFOAM General Assembly by ECO-PB. During the ECO-PB GA a new board was elected. The re-elected board members are Christine Arncken (FiBL-CH), Edith Lammerts van Bueren (LBI-NL), Hanne Ostergard (Risoe-DK), Francois Lhopiteau (ITAB-Fr), Klaus-Peter Wilbois (FiBL-D), and Hannah Jones (ORCEF-UK).

By Klaus-Peter Wilbois;

Motion on Protoplast fusion passed unanimously at the IFOAM General Assembly

The following motion text was put forward for voting and was accepted unanimously (four abstentions, no objections) by the General Assembly of IFOAM at Modena : "The IFOAM GA 2008 confirms that cell fusion, including protoplast and cytoplasm fusion, do not comply with the principles of organic agriculture. Therefore we urge the IFOAM World Board to develop clear guidelines on how to deal with varieties derived from cell fusion, including protoplast and cytoplasm fusion breeding techniques."

What the consequences are for the use of varieties bred with these techniques in the organic sector in Europe and other parts of the world has to be discussed in the coming year. The planned IFOAM World Congress on animal and plant breeding 25-28 August 2009 in Santa Fe, New Mexico will offer a broad platform for proposals for guidelines.

Background: The IFOAM definition of genetic engineering (GM) as formulated in the IFOAM Basic standards includes cell fusion. So within the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) there seems consensus on the fact that cell fusion does not comply to the IFOAM principles as GM is banned. However, the problem is how to deal with it in practice since varieties bred with this techniques are not labelled as GM and the use of these varieties is not explicitly forbidden in the EU regulation on organic farming.

Some countries have green or red variety lists to show which varieties are bred or not with cell fusion techniques, but most countries have not taken any measures. FiBL-CH has published a report on this issue to enhance the discussion, see www.fibl.ch. Seed companies who want to enter the organic market are seeking clarity on a short term.

Therefore several organisations prepared motions on this issue for the IFOAM General Assembly. The individual motions were put together in a joint ECO-PB motion and submitted to the IFOAM General Assembly (GA) on June 22-24, 2008 in Modena.

By Edith Lammerts van Bueren

Motion on plant breeding standards at IFOAM General Assembly

ECO-PB had also submitted another motion together with the same organisations that were partners in the above mentioned motion to the IFOAM General Assembly with the following text: "Complete the work on the draft plant breeding standards as soon as possible with the view of adopting them as IFOAM (certification) standards". Also this motion was accepted.

The reasoning of the motion was as follows. In the current version of the final draft of the IFOAM Basic Standards (IBS) in chapter 4 "Crop production" it reads "The objective is to ensure that organic practices are implemented along the entire production chain from propagation to final product including the production of seed and propagation materials". ECO-PB agrees with this objective but wants to ensure that the breeding process is included along with the production of seed and propagation material. Such has already been made explicit in the IFOAM Basic Standards with respect to breeding under animal production (see IBS 5.2) and under aqua production see 6.2) by stating that: "Only breeding techniques consistent with organic production methods are used." Such a statement is missing for crop production! Organic plant breeding has long been an essential part of organic farming. Because of this ECO-PB considers that IFOAM must now give clear guidance regarding the nature of organic plant breeding. It would otherwise be in danger of leaving the door open to all manner of inappropriate claims regarding the term, organic plant breeding. To make a public statement on organic plant breeding methods, it is vital that the current draft standards on plant breeding become full standards as soon as possible. ECO-PB would like to offer its expertise within the ECO-PB network to assist IFOAM in refining standards for organic plant breeding and adapting them to the new IBS framework (maybe as sector specific certification standards). But regardless of the need for refinement we now demand that in the meanwhile these draft standards stay published to feed the awareness that IFOAM is working on full standards.

The World Board agreed to keep the draft standards in place until new standards are accepted and welcomes new proposals to be discussed at the next World Congress on Animal and Plant breeding 25-28 August 2009 in Santa Fe, New Mexico. ECO-PB will organise a workshop in spring 2009 (date not determined) to discuss proposals in more detail.

By Edith Lammerts van Bueren

Brussels Conference on Value for Cultivation and Use of Variety testing for organic cereal production: What are the key issues? Proceedings now available

The full proceedings of this workshop that has already been reported in the previous newsletter (for background information see www.eco-pb.org/07/nops_1_08.pdf) is now available and can be downloaded from www.eco-pb.org/09/Proceedings_Brussel_08022829.pdf.

EU directive for acceptance of so called “conservation varieties”

The Commission Directive 2008/62/EC of 20 June 2008 provides for the first time in the EU the legal basis for certain derogations for acceptance of agricultural landraces and varieties which are naturally adapted to the local and regional conditions and threatened by genetic erosion and for marketing of seed and seed potatoes of those landraces and varieties.

The directive lays down legal details which need to be met with regard to the in-situ-conservation and sustainable use of land races and varieties threatened by genetic erosion. It was issued after almost ten years of consultation and revising and sets up the framework in which Member States may issue their own rules for the acceptance and marketing of “conservation varieties”.

Due to the relatively severe restrictions for the acceptance and marketing of seed of “conservation varieties” it remains to be seen whether the current directive can develop a substantial contribution against the rapidly declining diversity of cultivated plants.

The new directive can be found under:

<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2008:162:0013:0019:EN:PDF>

By Klaus-Peter Wilbois;

Monsanto acquires De Ruiters Seeds Group

Monsanto acquires De Ruiters Seeds Group B.V., a Dutch-holding company that owns and operates De Ruiters Seeds. Monsanto will start to transition the De Ruiters Seeds business into its vegetable seeds division alongside its other business units, Seminis and the International Seed Group, Inc. (ISG). The De Ruiters Seeds business will serve the protected-culture vegetable seed market, Seminis will serve the open-field vegetable seed market, and ISG will serve customers of regional seed businesses.

De Ruiters Seeds breeds, produces and sells hybrid vegetable seeds for top vegetable products such as tomato, cucumber, aubergine, pepper, melon and rootstock. De Ruiters Seeds is one of the top breeding companies in the world.

In 2005 Monsanto already purchased Seminis, the world's largest vegetable seed company, and became the biggest seed company in the world.

Since De Ruiters Seeds supplies also organic seed for greenhouse growing, it remains to be seen in the future what happens to this specific line of de Ruiters's business.

By Klaus-Peter Wilbois, Sources: Monsanto Company Press releases, www.monsanto.com

Results on smut resistance of winter barley varieties published

Resistance of winter barley against loose and covered smut has been checked in field experiments for several years at Dottenfelderhof near Frankfurt/Germany and the results are now available on the internet (report in German only).

A main problem in repetitive seed production of winter barley according to the guidelines of organic farming is the risk of an escalation of infections with covered smut (*Ustilago hordei*) and

in particular loose smut (*U. nuda*). The most effective way to avoid these diseases is the cultivation of resistant varieties. Therefore, in this research a screening of resistances in varieties has been carried out for several years. Concerning loose smut infection, four geographical origins of spores differed in their virulence checked by artificial infection of 15 varieties. 297 varieties were tested with spores originating from the testing site. Seven commercially available varieties and 12 recent lines showed genetically based resistances. Two varieties out of 15 favourites showed long-term resistance and furthermore resistance against all four geographic provenances of spores. Within the commercially available varieties, cleistogamy was observed in one variety after two test cycles and in five varieties after one cycle.

111 commercially available varieties were tested for resistance against covered smut by means of artificial infection. Two varieties remained without symptoms after two test cycles and five after one cycle. 25 varieties showed a moderate resistance. Resistance against loose smut did not correspond with resistance against covered smut.

Further field trials were conducted to compare common high yielding varieties with those chosen particularly with regard to good smut-resistance or tolerance. Cultivation followed the guidelines of organic farming. Quality criteria were grain yield and content of crude protein, and most important amino acids for animal nutrition (cystine, lysine, methionine, threonine, tryptophane). In consideration of all factors, the results of varieties chosen for good resistance against loose smut were not inferior compared to those recommended for solely high yielding in conventional farming.

Besides resistance against smuts, the degree of weed suppression was also estimated by means of measuring leaf areas and lengths of stalks. The leaf area proved to be the main factor. No variety achieved an all-embracing combination of good resistance against loose and covered smut, high yield including a satisfying content of essential amino acids and good potential for suppressing weeds. The availability of organically produced smut resistant or tolerant varieties is not satisfying as yet.

The full report can be found under:

http://www.dottenfelderhof-forschung.de/fileadmin/Publikationen/BLE_03_OE_657_LBS_und_IBDF.pdf.

By Norbert Lorenz and Hartmut Spieß; contact h.spieess@ibdf.de

Field study by UAB Institute of Environmental Science and Technology reveals that coexistence of organic and GM maize is practically impossible

The cultivation of genetically modified maize has caused a drastic reduction in organic cultivations of this grain and is making their coexistence practically impossible. This is the main conclusion reached in one of the first field studies in Europe carried out by a researcher of the Institute of Environmental Science and Technology of the Autonomous University of Barcelona, who has analysed the situation in Catalonia and Aragon, Europe's main producers of transgenic foods.

The study was carried out by researcher Rosa Binimelis of the UAB Institute of Environmental Science and Technology. Binimelis is working on the European project ALARM (Assessing Large Scale Risks for Biodiversity with Tested Methods) and analyses the application of the concept of coexistence between Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) and conventional

organic agriculture in the European Union. The results of the research have been published in Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics.

Since GM cultivation was introduced in Spain in 1998 it has been surrounded by controversy, and in the past few years has evolved into a debate over the concept of coexistence between transgenic and conventional organic agriculture. This concept was introduced in 2002 by the European Commission with two objectives: to deal with the emerging concerns derived from the admixture of different cultivations, since organic farmers are committed to not using GMOs, and to make it easier to lift the existing "de facto" moratorium - which is not officially recognised - within Europe so as to introduce new transgenic cultivations. Thus the concept of coexistence, after applying technical measures, should make it possible to operate freely in the market while reducing the political conflicts linked to GMOs. The European Commission is planning this year to evaluate how the policy of coexistence has been implemented in the past ten years.

Before GMOs were introduced previous studies in this area were carried out using modelling or experimental cases, due to the lack of commercial fields in most European countries. Researcher Rosa Binimelis however analyses the situation in Catalonia and Aragon, where the commercial cultivation of transgenic crops began in 1998. This research is therefore unique and especially relevant to the European Commission's assessment scheduled for this year and involved qualitative techniques by means of 51 in-depth interviews and participant observation (twenty-two interviews with farmers while the remaining were held with key political figures, including government representatives, scientists, academics, as well as NGO members and other organisations and platforms).

The situation of both types of cultivations in 2007 was the following: the surface used to plant transgenic maize in Catalonia and Aragon was respectively 23,000 ha and 35,900 ha, which represent 55% and 42% of the total surface used to cultivate this crop. The variety of maize grown is the Bt corn, which is designed to ward off the European corn borer and is used mainly for feed production. The maize production process is integrated in cereal cooperatives, which cover the entire production chain from the sale of seeds and inputs to commercialisation, including technical advice. This system involves numerous infrastructures, which makes it difficult and expensive to segregate GM from organic and conventional production. There are no specific silos for organic maize while only a minority of cooperatives in the region restricts the use of GMOs. In parallel, organic agriculture is in expansion in Spain, increasing in the number of producers and hectares. However, this trend is reverted for the case of maize.

The author's analysis reveals a social confrontation between proponents and opponents of GM technology regarding the consequences it can have and the measures to be taken in regulating and taking responsibility for any cases of admixture. Confrontation also exists when trying to define technical measures that would guarantee this coexistence since there are many doubts about its objectives. Finally, the study analyses the difficulties organic farmers would face in order to claim compensations if admixture took place, due to technical uncertainties in measuring the level of "contamination" or its origin, but also because of possible social confrontations and doubts about how the GM technology was introduced. In addition, many farmers who could sue for damages prefer not to in order to avoid any local confrontations in small villages.

As a result, the area devoted to organic maize was reduced by 75% in Aragon from 2004 (year in which the first analyses were carried out) to 2007 and by 5% in Catalonia between 2002 and 2005. The percentage in Catalonia is lower because the only available data come from the first years of the analyses, when the cultivation of GM maize was not as widespread as it is today.

The trend was confirmed by organic certification bodies for the following years. This will lead to even more difficulties in obtaining local organically grown maize.

Given this context, the research concludes that both the concept of coexistence and different implementation proposals have generated new problems instead of solving existing conflicts. By making farming models and the interpretation of their impacts an individual choice, the only issues taken into account in the system of compensation are individualised and economically valuable aspects. The results until now point to the promotion of genetically modified farming over any other alternative.

Source: Innovations Report, Germany, June 30, 2008

The economic impacts of GM Contamination incidents on the organic sector

is the title of a research study by Kathleen Hewlett of Soil Association. In this work she concludes that GM contamination can give rise to a wide range of economic impacts beyond those related to legal tolerance standards. These include lost markets, lost sales, lower prices, negative publicity, withdrawal of organic certification and product recalls. Adoption of specific standards in the legislation is unlikely to adequately reduce these incidences. These findings highlight the need for strict measures to be required to be undertaken by GM farmers in order to avoid all contamination of organic crops, not just contamination above the 0.9% EU GM labelling threshold.

Further information:

www.ifoam.org/events/ifoam_conferences/owc/modules/abstracts_pdfs/hewlett_abs_GMO.pdf