

## **Subject: Field tests with genetically modified poplars**

### Question

Poplars are increasingly used as a source of sustainable energy. By means of genetic engineering it is possible to produce increased quantities of ethanol from the timber of improved varieties of poplar. This bio-ethanol is used for the production of second-generation biofuels.

Scientific investigation into GM poplars serves as a model for innovative policy in the Community. From that point of view it has a place within the broader Lisbon strategy. In order to further refine and optimise the technology of these GM poplars, it is necessary to carry out field tests with these trees. However, such field tests sometimes come in for criticism owing to fears about the negative effects of the release of GM trees. Nevertheless, these field tests have received a generally positive opinion from, among others, the Belgian biosafety council.

What is the Commission's view on carrying out such field tests and the technology of obtaining ethanol from genetically enhanced poplars

### Answer

Field trials of GMOs, including GM trees, are carried out in accordance with the provisions of Part B (Articles 6-11) of Directive 2001/18/EC<sup>(1)</sup>. It is the purpose of field trials to provide essential information on the performance and characteristics of the GMO in the environment, relative to conventional plant varieties. When seeking authorization under part B of Directive 2001/18/EC detailed information must be provided about the GMO and the trial and in particular the environmental risks identified and corresponding management measures. The Competent Authority will assess the application and if consent for the release is given, additional management measures may also be specified. Under article 6(9) of Directive 2001/18 Member States are required to ensure that material derived from GMOs under a Part B authorization, is not placed on the market.

Twenty deliberate releases of GM poplars for field trials have been approved by national competent authorities in Europe between 1991 and 2008. Four of these trials have taken place in the EU since 2002, when Directive 2001/18/EC entered into force. One trial is presently being carried out in France with a view to evaluating its properties for bio-energy production. It is also the aim of this trial to collect data on biodiversity. We understand that a final decision has not yet been taken with regard to the most recent proposal to carry out a field trial involving a GM poplar.

The Commission has not received any other information regarding criticism or potential problems related to the dissemination of GM trees outside the designated trial areas. In principle, ethanol derived from woody biomass has a potential to contribute to the EU targets for climate change mitigation. Further research is required in order to improve the efficiency of the production of such "second generation" biofuels. Biotechnology offers one way to contribute to this process, provided the resulting products are safe for the environment and human health. Field trials are a necessary prerequisite for a potential future approval of such products for commercial cultivation.