

GM CROPS HIGHLY DANGEROUS, WARN AUSTRIAN CAMPAIGNERS

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Genetically modified crops have the potential to wreak economic havoc on farmers, Austrian campaigners told a press conference Monday, warning that the development was the "biggest danger of our time".

One day after a Swiss referendum in which 55 percent of people voted against planting gene-altered organisms, Austrian campaigners insisted the rejection rate would have been 70 percent in Austria.

"But we're not allowed to vote," protested biological farmers' spokesman Volker Helldorff. "The European Union is forcing us to use gene technology - against the will of the population," he added.

In 1997, a total of 1.2 million Austrians signed a petition against gene technology.

"Gene technology serves to enrich gene seed firms. Everyone else comes to harm," said Helldorff, citing the example of farmers in Iraq who were urged to burn their seeds, and instead use gene-manipulated products from the US firm Monsanto.

There was adequate proof of the dangers, he insisted. He cited the example of the first "gene farmer" in Germany, who fed his cattle gene-altered maize, watched the entire herd of more than 60 cows "wither away and die".

The reason was that with each kilogramme of "gene-maize", the animals had eaten 8.3 nanogrammes of insecticide. "Gene technology is the biggest danger of our time," Helldorff warned.

Richard Tomasch, founder and spokesman of the anti-gene pressure group "Pro Leben", warned of the irreversibility of gene manipulation.

He spoke of so-called "terminator plants" which destroyed ability of seeds to germinate again once they had ripened.

In India, planting gene-altered cotton had led to "catastrophic harvest losses which drove thousands of farmers to suicide", Tomasch said.

In Argentina, the population suffered hunger because gene-altered soya destined for export had pushed back the planting of traditional foods, he said.

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