



# MGC delegation begins dialogue with EU on biotechnology

by Ilene K. Grossman

Nebraska Gov. Mike Johanns recently led a delegation of regional state officials from a place where agricultural biotechnology has been widely embraced and used — America's Midwest — to a part of the globe where the science is still looked upon warily — Europe. The differences are significant, as are the potential economic effects on farmers from this region.

“If the EU (European Union) chooses to demand disclosure of biotechnology on food labeling, it could, in effect, create a trade barrier,” Johanns says. “The problem is that in a product — take pork, for example — there is no easy way to trace whether the pig was fed genetically altered feed. The new labeling and traceability requirements could force producers to label the ingredients of the ingredients. That becomes so onerous, so extensive, that it literally closes the EU market to our products.”

The importance of the issue motivated the Midwestern group's May visit to Brussels, where Johanns and others met with European leaders to discuss agricultural biotechnology. The delegation was organized by the Midwestern Governors' Conference, which Johanns chairs. The trip was funded by grants from the German Marshall Fund of the United States and the Pew Initiative on Food and Biotechnology.

In the United States, nearly 70 percent of the soybean and cotton acreage and about one-third of the corn acreage are planted with genetically modified (GM) crops. This country accounts for more than 70 percent of the world's acreage devoted to GM crops, and the EU's concerns about these products, along with possible actions by other countries, could cause serious problems for American agriculture.

Meeting with organizations as diverse as Greenpeace and Europe's biotechnology industry association, along with key EU commissioners and members of the European Parliament, the delegation discussed food safety, innovation in agriculture and the impact that new EU regulations could have on American producers.

In addition to Johanns and Nebraska first lady Stephanie Johanns, the group included Patty Judge, Iowa secretary of agriculture; Fred

Dailey, Ohio agriculture director; Merlyn Carlson, Nebraska agriculture director; Peter Hofherr, Missouri deputy agriculture director; and Caleb Weaver, policy adviser to Missouri Gov. Bob Holden.

## Prospects of new regulations

The EU is in the process of considering new policies on GM products. This fall, it will decide whether to end the de facto moratorium on the approval of new GM products into the European market.

Last year, the European Commission proposed two regulations related to GM products. Its proposals are now being looked at by the European Parliament, which must review and assent to the commission's proposals.

The proposed regulations would replace much of the legislation currently governing GM products. They would establish a system to trace genetically modified organisms (GMOs) throughout the production and distribution process, require labeling of GM feeds and reinforce the EU's current rules on GM foods. Labeling would be required for any product above a 1 percent threshold for the technically unavoidable presence of live GMOs, although some in the Parliament would like to see the standard lowered to .5 percent.

The MGC delegation met with a number of top-level EU leaders, including its commissioners on agriculture, the environment, and health and consumer protection. The message the Midwestern delegation received was essentially the same from all three commissioners — consumers have the right to know what is in the foods they eat.

The commissioners were more positive about the possibility of restarting the approval process to allow more GM products into the European Union once the labeling requirements were in place, but other observers are not sure that member states will be so ready to move ahead. EU Health and Consumer Protection Commissioner David Byrne adds that addressing consumer concerns about agricultural biotechnology in Europe has been “like walking on eggshells.”

While it is difficult to argue with the claim that products should be labeled so consumers know what they are eating, there appears to be very little discussion in Europe about the potential benefits of GM products. Instead, members of the Midwestern delegation all were

struck by continuing apprehension in Europe about the safety of food. Because of recent experiences with mad cow disease and dioxin-tainted cola, Europeans do not have the same trust in their regulatory system as Americans do.

“[This] allows advocacy groups to seize the role of protecting the health of the citizens and makes it extremely difficult to base food safety on scientific principles,” Judge says. EU Environment Commissioner Margot Wallström called the current period a “confidence-building phase” in Europe.

Regulatory oversight may not get measurably better in the near future. The new European Food Safety Authority, which was formally established earlier this year by the EU, is likely to be more of a coordinating body than a regulatory agency because of member states' unwillingness to cede power to a supranational body.

## Lessons brought home

While in Europe, the MGC delegates made the case for biotechnology as an important innovation in agriculture. Farmers in the United States have welcomed agricultural biotechnology because of productivity gains and the ability to reduce their use of pesticides, the group told EU officials. Dailey gave the example of how the planting of BT cotton has allowed farmers in the Mississippi Delta to apply one million fewer gallons of pesticides on their crops. Less pesticide use should make for less agricultural runoff and cleaner water.

Some delegates expressed concern that Europe was overlooking sound science in response to fears about food safety or to create a form of protectionist trade policy. From their experience in Brussels, the Midwestern officials were able to bring home some important messages for the region's farmers and policymakers.

Judge points out that “the inclusion of feed in the regulation will certainly cause commodity grain movement problems into the EU [because] the present grain handling system in the Midwest does not lend itself to segregation or identity preservation easily.”

The MGC delegates agreed that they, and American agricultural producers, have their work cut out for them. State officials plan to work with commodity organizations to increase understanding about the seriousness of the problem and, if necessary, to prepare for new labeling standards. Farmers would have to adapt to these standards, which will cost money, and they will get no added value from any changes made.

Johanns says U.S. officials should continue their work to promote biotechnology.

“There is a very positive opportunity for individual state governors and other officials to reach out to European Union officials and demonstrate the specific benefits of biotechnology used and/or produced in each of our states,” the Republican governor believes. “Any efforts to make these contacts would, in my view, bolster what the president and federal trade officials have been attempting to do.” ✪



European Union Environment Commissioner Margot Wallström (left) meets with the state officials that traveled to Brussels in May on behalf of the Midwestern Governors' Conference. Nebraska Gov. Mike Johanns (center, at right) led the delegation. The MGC is staffed by the Midwestern Office of The Council of State Governments.