

## **Raising Awareness in the European Union**

Marc and Anita Loiselle and Hart Haidn were invited by Greenpeace to tour Germany, Austria and Switzerland from August 5<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup>, 2002. The purpose of this trip was to inform Europeans about the Canadian experience with GMOs. The visit was initiated by Ulrike Brendel, agriculture and gene-technology campaigner for Greenpeace Germany who had visited Saskatchewan in June.

### **First stop: Hamburg**

The first stop was Hamburg, where Greenpeace Germany's headquarters is. We had our first media event there at one of the City of Hamburg two large organic farms. "Gut Wulksfelde" is a 250 hectare farm located at the outskirts of this city of 2 million. The farm produces grain and vegetables, and raises cattle, hogs, geese and chicken. Most of the grain is being processed and an on-farm bakery produces a wide range of wonderful German breads.

The close proximity to a large customer base is ideal for promoting direct sales. The farm has developed a food box scheme that ships 800 boxes weekly of a wide variety of organically produced foods. To complement the product line the farm contracts with other organic processors.

There is also a very nice market store/shop on the farm. People are encouraged to visit and signs are all over to explain various aspects of the farm. The shop and the opportunity to see the farm and have it explained is very popular specifically with young families.

### **On to Berlin**

From Hamburg we traveled to Berlin, the location of Greenpeace Germany's political relations office. Here we had numerous meetings with journalists from a wide variety of papers for the next two days.

We also had an opportunity to visit the bio-dynamic Brodowin farm, at 1,200 hectares, quite large by German standards. The farm was on the territory of former Eastern Germany, where the communist regime had forced the creation of large collective farms. After re-unification, the land was given back to its original owners. Most did not want to farm themselves, so the size of the farm remained more or less the same, but is owned by about 140 individuals.

The farm lies in an area that has been declared an international Biosphere Reserve (similar to Redberry Lake in west central Saskatchewan). The owners decided to convert the farm to organic production and have it run by a manager. The decision was made because the owners realized that their best chance to preserve farm structure and jobs was to build a farm that would produce food of high value with the potential of value-adding and direct sales.

Central to the operation is a dairy herd complemented by grain production. It is certified by Demeter, the organization that promotes and certifies bio-dynamic farms. The vegetable production unit is operated independently from the farm proper. Also this farm operates an on-farm market shop and a box scheme.

Because the farm operates within the Biosphere Reserve, funds are available to research environmental aspects of the farm conversion. In the relative short time of operation it has been observed that the bio-diversity has increased sharply. The field-lark population for example has increased 48 times. Butterflies and many other beneficial insects are plentiful again, and plants begin to appear that one cannot find on conventional farms anymore. The populations of small wildlife including hares, pheasant and grouse have multiplied.

Organic farming is heavily supported in the EU, as is conventional farming. A supporting infrastructure has been developed, which includes an extension service and a network of demonstration farms.

## **Bayer (Aventis) Headquarters**

From Berlin we traveled to Leverkusen, a city basically owned by the chemical and pharmaceutical giant Bayer that has recently acquired the bio-tech corporation Aventis. Greenpeace had organized a demonstration with support from different farm organizations.

One large banner read "Canadian Farmers Accuse Bayer", another one the same message in German. This was in reference to the class action law suit by Saskatchewan organic farmers facilitated by the Saskatchewan Organic Directorate (SOD) against Monsanto and Bayer. Marc's attempt to speak to an official from Bayer was not successful.

The second topic central to this demonstration was the release of the results of a Greenpeace initiated poll that shows that a vast majority of German farmers and consumers still reject genetic engineering in agriculture after years of intense public relations campaigns by the 'life science' corporations.

## **High Level Meetings in Bonn**

The visit in Germany ended with a meeting in Bonn with 11 officials from the federal Ministry of Consumer Protection, Food and Agriculture, the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Environment.

This was a lively exchange of information and it was obvious that the Canadian experience with genetically modified canola was not known to the extent that needs to be known. We had the feeling that this exchange was valuable for both sides. For us it was important to learn about Germany's efforts to make agriculture more sustainable and to put more emphasis on the multi-functionality of farming.

It was clear that from this meeting that there is a genuine concern about the possible consequences of the release of GMOs, and about the pressures of the WTO as well as the nation state's commitments to and constraints from the regulations of the European Union. From this group we felt a strong sense of inevitability that the EU would open up to GMOs. This sentiment was reflected in meetings in the other countries.

It was also interesting to hear from European opponents to the genetic engineering of food products, that they believe that the entanglement of 'life science' corporations with governments, farm organizations and universities is not as tight there as in North America.

## **Austria - EU's Organic Leader**

In Austria we met with representatives of the two organic farming umbrella organizations. Other meetings were held with representatives of general farm organizations and with the federal Ministry of Agriculture.

Within the EU Austria has by far the largest number of organic farmers (over 18,000) and the highest percentage of land converted to organic farming (over 10%). This is also reflected in the wide variety of organically produced food in all grocery stores.

Most Austrian farmers want to keep Austria GMO-free. The struggle has therefore shifted to the legal aspects of how this can be done.

As part of our press conference in Vienna, Greenpeace Austria released a study that outlined these legal aspects and outlined, which routes are open for the Austrian Länder (provinces) to declare themselves GMO free zones as opposed to a federal initiative.

Anita and Marc then went on to Switzerland, while Hart stayed in Vienna for another day of meetings.

## **Swiss Farmer Organizations**

In Switzerland we met with a representative of the association for small and mid-sized farms, the VKMB, and along with Greenpeace campaigners on genetic engineering, we toured the agricultural part of Expo 2002 on the very day that organic agriculture was featured. The lead singer of a band that was playing when we arrived is the owner of the largest farm in Switzerland, which is also certified organic. One of his many organizational activities includes being part of Sativa, which works on developing and propagating crop varieties most appropriate for organic agriculture. He acknowledged our presence and the legal fight against GE promoters and they dedicated a song to us.

We then met with the Director of Bio Suisse to discuss not only the strengths of organic farming but also the threat of GE crops in Europe and the situation we have here in Canada. Marc thanked him for his organization's recent contribution to the SOD's Organic Agriculture Protection Fund.

Bio Suisse along with other farmer organizations like the VKMB, plus Greenpeace, the WWF, the Swiss Consumer's Union, the Consumer Protection League, a doctors association and others, form a Swiss working group on genetic engineering. This alliance has been operating for several years and has its own secretariat. It is seeking to maintain or enhance the current moratorium on GE crops and food.

## **Educating journalists in Bern and Lausanne**

We also had several meetings in Bern and Lausanne with journalists representing especially the Swiss agricultural publications. One of these encounters revealed a sentiment that we North Americans must be accepting of GE crops and foods because of the extent of its production, the widespread contamination and that we had no labeling scheme to alert us of what we were eating. We dispelled that myth by stating that polling by independent NGOs and government clearly show that an overwhelming majority of citizens do not want GE food and

also want mandatory labeling; but unfortunately the concerns have not been acted upon. The governments continue to make it easy for the continued use of and introduction of new GE crops/foods by acting as promoters also and not changing the regulatory framework and not imposing a requested moratorium on further GE development and release.

Later this fall, the Swiss parliament will be deciding on a proposed law that would hold liable the promoter or patent holder who obtains authorization for the release of a transgenic product if there is escape of any genetic material at any level, be it during research trials, commercial production, etc.

## **The question of "co-existence"**

In Germany, Austria, and Switzerland bureaucratic efforts have now shifted to the issue of coexistence. This concept is based on the assumption that it is possible to contain genetically manipulated organisms so that their spreading can be prevented. To accomplish this, Austria is developing a sophisticated system of keeping the seed free of contamination that includes the way seed is multiplied, processed and distributed. To make it work, the system is built on much improved seed sampling, analysis and monitoring.

This approach is very different from what has been suggested in North America, where the attention is on segregation of crops after harvest. The Austrian way seeks the prevention of contamination, while in North America regulators have accepted the fact that contamination cannot be prevented.

While the attempt to prevent the spread of GMOs by developing a system of seed control seems to make more sense than to fix the problem after it has occurred, it only will delay the wide distribution of unwanted organisms. It is an ivory-tower approach that does not realize the facts of life and the laws of nature: life forms cannot be contained.

It is not only cross-pollination and gene-flow that will assure the unwanted spread of genetic traits. Spreading of unwanted species has always occurred in thousands of ways through animal and human activities. The latter includes unwanted and intentional use and distribution.

A week before our visit, Greenpeace Germany had detected a field of illegally seeded corn. It is assumed that corruption in Eastern Europe has allowed the importation of genetically modified seed on a larger scale. Canada has suffered for years from the illegal use of unregistered varieties of wheat that are compromising the high quality standards of Canadian wheat.

## **Onwards to further collaboration**

Overall we, along with Greenpeace, have rated our tour as positive and highly successful. It was a mutual learning experience. Many contacts were made and there is lots of follow-up to do. This opportunity has clearly demonstrated the importance of creating alliances and stimulating collaboration to further the necessary work to prevent GMOs from becoming an even larger problem in agriculture and our food than it is now. Future endeavours are already being planned.

We had preliminary discussions with some organizations and have sent a proposal to Greenpeace in which we suggest some follow-up actions and meetings in the EU.

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