

Viewing cable 09BUCHAREST232, ROMANIA: SUCCESSFUL BIOTECH OUTREACH TO NEW GOVERNMENT

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SUBJECT: ROMANIA: SUCCESSFUL BIOTECH OUTREACH TO NEW GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS

REF: A) BUCHAREST 29; B) STATE 20108; C) BUCHAREST 120

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¶1. (U) SUMMARY: On March 16 and 17, DOS Senior Advisor for Biotechnology Jack Bobo visited Romania to meet with new Romanian government officials to advocate for the benefits of agricultural biotechnology. Mr. Bobo's visit was supported by biotech outreach funds from EEB (refs A and B). Post's Economic Section and Foreign Agricultural Service also organized a mid-level roundtable to discuss biotech safety and regulation issues in the EU. Officials and participants indicated continuing support for agricultural biotechnology in Romania and discussed ways to strengthen their pro-biotech voice within the EU. Industry representatives plan to initiate the first stacked field testing in Europe this season in western Romania. END SUMMARY.

MEETINGS WITH GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS

¶2. (SBU) Following on post's previous biotech outreach efforts to

farmers and academics, post sought to capitalize on an opportunity to discuss and educate new Romanian government officials about agricultural biotechnology. Under the previous government, the Agriculture and Environment Ministries disagreed about the use of biotechnology crops in Romania. However, the new officials at the ministries have a more cooperative relationship as evidenced by Romania's recent supportive vote in the EU for the cultivation of two new additional biotech corn varieties (reftel C). Mr. Bobo met with representatives from the Ministries of Agriculture and Environment as well as the National Veterinary Authority.

¶3. (SBU) At the Ministry of Agriculture, Mr. Vasile Bacila, Chief Adviser to Minister Ilie Sarbu, reiterated the Minister's support of agricultural biotechnology extending back to his previous term as Agriculture Minister prior to 2004. Bacila also highlighted Romanian efforts to use biotechnology for biofuel production. However, he opined that the cost may be too high for large-scale production. He also stated that Minister Sarbu recently traveled to Brussels to lobby for biotech agricultural options in the Environment Committee, but was told he would need to wait for further approval from the European Food Safety Authority. (Note: Sarbu's daughter, Daciana-Octavia Sarbu, is a member of the European Parliament, sits on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety Committee, and is strongly anti-biotech).

¶4. (SBU) Mr. Bobo also met with the new President (State Secretary equivalent) at the Veterinary Authority, Marian Zlotea, and his office directors, Liviu Rusu and Nicolae Lazar. Mr. Zlotea is a former EU parliamentarian and has experience working in the EU structures. While he expressed support for biotechnology, he also mentioned the difficulty in meeting stringent EU requirements with regards to biotech traceability issues. Concerning the promotion of biotechnology in Romania, he expressed frustration that government officials must advocate for agricultural biotechnology. In his opinion, private industry should better organize biotech supporters to ensure their voices lead public debate, not the government. He felt the showdown between the government and green groups only further erodes public support for biotechnology because citizens remain skeptical of government-supported programs. Mr. Zlotea stated he prefers that the government be a mediator in the debate, not an advocate. He also commented that the GOR is under pressure from other EU member states such as Austria, Hungary and France regarding Romania's pro-biotech stance and that Romania needs more support within the European Commission because it can not stand alone in the face of anti-biotech members.

¶5. (U) The Veterinary Authority expressed particular interest in the "EnviroPig," which Mr. Bobo said is under development in the U.S. The genetically-modified animal is intended to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 75 percent. (Note: Romania is a large pork producing and consuming society.) Zlotea and his office directors seemed open to the possibility of using such options in the future and would like more information and research on transgenic and cloned animals.

¶6. (SBU) Additionally, Mr. Bobo met at the Ministry of Environment with two of Minister Nicolae Nemirschi's personal counselors, Iozeana Lipan and Irina Tudorache, and Office Director Silviu Megan. All expressed openness to the possibilities of agricultural biotechnology, especially for biofuels, but remained concerned about

the impact of such products on the environment, especially with regard to co-existence problems. As per reftel C, they reiterated their continued need for more science-based studies ensuring the safety of biotech applications.

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WORKING LEVEL ROUNDTABLE

¶7. (SBU) The working level roundtable was attended by twenty representatives from the Ministries of Agriculture, Environment, Foreign Affairs and the Veterinary Authority. In his presentation, Mr. Bobo reiterated the role that agricultural biotechnology has in addressing global challenges in food security, energy and the environment. He mentioned that Romania has a strong agricultural history and experience in growing biotech crops, especially prior to joining the EU, highlighting that the scientific approach is the key to success. His information was well received; Romanian counterparts expressed enthusiasm for the continued use of biotech products and expressed frustration over the European approach banning soy and efforts hampering further expansion of biotech crops. Mr. Bobo further encouraged Romanian policy makers to play an active role in the EU to preserve biotech options for farmers.

¶8. (U) In addition to Mr. Bobo's presentation, Parliamentarian and President of the Agricultural Commission Valeriu Tabara provided an overview of the political situation in the EU, urging adoption of a more scientific EU approach in order to use biotechnology to help with problems in food security, climate change, drought and flooding. Additionally, he noted the economic impact of the post-EU accession ban on biotech soybean cultivation in Romania and estimated that it has cost farmers up to 500 million USD in lost revenue.

¶9. (U) Senior Advisor for Biotechnology at the Ministry of Agriculture, Ms. Tatiana Preda, also presented information that the government is undertaking changes to improve co-existence laws and expects a continued increase in the planting of biotech corn in the coming year, up to 12,000 hectares in 2009. She also discussed the environmental benefits of biotech crops in biofuel production, but like Mr. Bacila she expressed concern about the cost effectiveness.

PRESS INTERVIEWS

¶10. (U) Mr. Bobo also conducted interviews with the Jurnal National, Romania's largest circulation newspaper, and with the agricultural trade magazine AgroTerra. These interviews should be published shortly, and post will provide translated copies to the Department. Post also used EEB funds for biotech outreach to translate an article on biotech in Romania by Dr. Peter Gregory, who visited Romania twice in biotech promotion programs post organized in 2008. The article was published in AgroTerra to coincide with Mr. Bobo's visit.

NEW INDUSTRY-INITIATED STACKED FIELD TESTING

¶11. (SBU) Mr. Bobo also met with industry representatives from

Monsanto and Syngenta (he had met with a Pioneer representative during his prior stop in Hungary). The industry officials noted that anti-biotech EU member states, particularly France, are lobbying the GOR to change its position on biotechnology. The representatives agreed that organizing a group of pro-biotech supporters would be beneficial and could help support Romania and other newer EU member states to exchange experiences with more developed countries such as Spain, thereby banding their voices together in dealings with the Commission.

¶12. (SBU) As part of their outreach efforts, businesses plan to bring more Spanish researchers to educate Romanian authorities about crop co-existence isolation distances, since each state can establish its own isolation distances for biotech crops. Romania's standard is currently 200 meters, but Bulgaria recently proposed a thirty kilometer distance, which could impact Romanian farms near the border. With regard to the introduction of new varieties, industry members mentioned that Romania continues to have problems with weed population diversity and corn root worm, which are not addressed by MON810, but could be addressed by varieties commercially available in the U.S. They expect Roundup Ready corn will be available in Romania in 2010 or 2011, followed by soy. Representatives stated Romanian farmers and officials do not understand that approval for the reintroduction of soy is necessary at the EU level, which is more difficult because compared to corn, soy is not as large a share of the market in other parts of the EU as it is in Romania.

¶13. (SBU) Currently, the companies are working together to create a field testing station in the Timisoara (western Romania) district of biotech supporter and Parliament member Mr. Tabara. It would be the first in Europe to conduct field trials of stacked varieties, which combine two or more biotech traits, such as insect resistance and herbicide tolerance, in a single plant. They expect to start this

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summer with biotech events from several companies and will stack up to eight traits in a single plant. The goal is to use the site as a model for Europe and to bring farmers and politicians from elsewhere in the EU to prove the benefits of the technology. Supporters believe Romania has the potential to be a leader in Europe on agricultural biotechnology, and a model field testing station and coalition of biotech-supportive countries could help Romania leverage political power in the EU. Post will continue to work with industry representatives to support cooperative efforts amongst EU member countries on biotechnology.

¶15. (SBU) Comment: Post would like to thank the Department for its continued financial support to allow post to conduct biotech outreach programs in Romania. Mr. Bobo's visit and expertise helped solidify our relations with Romania's new government officials. Biotech supporters in-country greatly appreciate post's and the Department's activities to support Romanian officials in their efforts to promote pro-biotech policies in Europe. Post will continue to work with these officials to strengthen their voices with other pro-biotech countries. Additionally, post will coordinate with industry representatives as they develop the first stacked field testing in Europe on Romanian soil, which will no

doubt help deepen Romania's experience and allow it to serve as a role model in the EU for pro-biotech education of farmers and policy makers. End Comment.

GUTHRIE-CORN