

SPEECH OF THE MINISTER FOR AGRICULTURE OF THE BASQUE COUNTRY IN THE OPENING OF THE ASSEMBLY OF THE EUROPEAN GMO-FREE REGIONS NETWORK.

Dear Minister for Agriculture of Piedmont, Dear President of Slow Food Italy, Dear members of the GMO-Free Regions network, Ladies and Gentlemen.

It is a pleasure for me to take part in this assembly of the European GMO-free regions network. It is the first assembly hosted since the Basque Country assumed the presidency last April and it is certainly a special one. Throughout these two days we will enhance our relation with a movement as important as Slow Food. We both share many interests and values such as the defence of the production of traditional foodstuffs, the preservation of the genetic heritage of animals and plants, and the union between producers and consumers.

Slow Food is a movement in continuous growth that has acquired considerable social notoriety and confidence among consumers. Likewise, the network of European GMO-free regions, as a political association made up mostly of regional governments, has led a sustained struggle against the European Commission and, more often than not, against the Central Governments of the States, in the defence of an agro-livestock sector based on traditional products, using the quality of its agro-livestock production as an essential factor of competitiveness and trying to convey a concept of quality for a whole region.

This is why the collaboration agreement that we will sign tomorrow between the European GMO-free Regions Network and Slow Food

International, takes on a higher relevance, and certainly will be the beginning of a highly satisfactory path for both organisations.

From the creation of the network we have developed our work by means of our own regional governments' initiatives as well as those of the network in order to obtain recognition from the European Commission of the regions' capacity to make decisions about GM crops. This work is still being carried out, and although this recognition is yet pending, I can state that the network has evolved satisfactorily. That is to say:

- The Network has established regular political contacts with different European institutions.
- The number of member regions has increased remarkably.
- The Network has developed actions in different areas such as the supply of GMO-free soy in Europe.
- It has released and disseminated information on the Network and GMOs.
- It has set new objectives such as the possibility of adopting common regulations on coexistence, or approving a common label for GMO-free foodstuffs.

In a word, we have worked with rigour and heartfelt enthusiasm.

Looking back to the work carried out in the network during all these years, it would like to underline three aspects that have proved to be essential:

- 1) The need to keep working with the European institutions, so that regions' right to adopt its own production policy and, in that

framework, to decide whether they want GMOs in their territory or not.

- 2) The commitment of the regions to use coexistence rules, until this right is finally recognised, in order to protect traditional productions and to prevent GM crops.
- 3) To Get to the consumers, who are the agents on which the quality policies of the Network's member regions are based.

These are the main axes on which the Assembly will work later today.

In the last Network's Assembly, held in Bilbao last April, it was decided to set up several working groups. I have no doubt that they will work hard and they will provide us with some proposals on the aspects previously mentioned, as well as on the future of the network.

Today we are more numerous and stronger. The network has grown not only in members but also in activities, and its outside recognition is also increasing. This is why during these two days we will also reflect on some basic aspects such as the legal form of the network, its image and its organisation.

We will see until where we are able to move forward in the unification of coexistence regulations and their capacity to prevent GM productions.

We will also work on the possibility to set up a common logo for GMO-free foodstuffs and the implementing specifications.

As I say, part of the morning today will be devoted to launching the activities of two of the Network's working groups: one dealing with the

protection of non transgenic agriculture and the other dealing with GMO-Free labelling.

Later, from 11H30 until 13H00, we will hold the General Assembly of the Network. At 14H30, it is foreseen that we leave to take part in the opening ceremony of the fair "Terra Madre".

I believe, therefore, that we have some very intense work ahead of us for the following two days. But before finishing I would like to thank deeply the Government of Piedmont, the Government of Tuscany and Slow Food for the hard work carried out to make this meeting possible.

Without further ado, I declare the Assembly of the European GMO-Free Regions Network open.

Thank you very much.