

ERA-Net - Letter of Interest

by the Collaborative Working Group on Risk Research related to Genetically Modified Organisms under the Standing Committee on Agricultural Research

At the level of the European Union, a comprehensive legal framework concerning the authorisation of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) has been established. Ensuring a high level of protection of the environment, human health as well as animal welfare is a crucial point within this process and shall be addressed adequately from a scientific point of view by independent risk research. Within this context, the conclusions of the Environment Council concerning GMOs from December 2008 stated the following: “[The Council] Emphasises that Member States and the Commission should ensure that systematic and independent research on the potential risks involved in the deliberate release or the placing on the market of GMOs is conducted; [...]”. In the light of these demands and challenges, the necessity for a specific cooperation on the European level has been seen.

Therefore, in June 2009 Austria proposed the installation of a new Collaborative Working Group under SCAR focusing on risk research on genetically modified organisms (CWG GMO). The following countries are members of the CWG GMO: Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom.

The CWG GMO has been initiated to build a European wide platform for preparing and facilitating European co-operations in a joint approach. The first step was an effort to map the research landscape, i.e. describe the status-quo of European risk research providing an overview over national programmes, funding schemes and research activities (up to the project level) which are financed publicly. Work was undertaken to develop a searchable database of research projects funded by the participating countries. On the basis of an analysis of past and on-going research projects, the CWG GMO worked on identifying the most relevant key topics for future research activities (being at the same time aware of EFSA’s respective document on research priorities).

Through this cooperation existing knowledge could be made more transparent and thus better accessible, resulting eventually in an enhancement of knowledge transfer, too. In particular, this joint approach should identify the most relevant research priorities as well as foster, strengthen and optimize future joint research activities. It is not intended to interfere in or duplicate the work of EU-Agencies, Research Centres or Committees.

The focus lies upon risk research within the natural sciences dealing with possible impacts of GMOs on human health, animal health and the environment. Of priority interest are plants, animals and microorganisms for food and feed use as far as they are covered by the relevant EU legislation on GMOs such as Directive 2001/18/EC and Regulation (EC) N°1829/2003. Risk management, risk perception or socio-economic considerations are not within the scope of the CWG GMO.

Necessity for an ERA-Net within Framework Programme 7, WP 2013

The value of an ERA-net lies in supporting and enhancing the evidence base used to support the environmental risk assessment of Genetically Modified Organisms to ensure this keeps pace with future developments in the technology.

Discussions and analyses within the CWG GMO have shown that national capacities are increasingly limited. In particular, smaller countries have a rather limited potential to conduct research projects of a considerable size. Moreover, it is useful to coordinate national research activities on a European level to effectively tackle questions in risk research on genetically modified organisms in a joint effort. It is especially challenging for countries to individually support complex, long-term scientific projects. European and international cooperation as well as coordination of expertise is of increasing importance. Additionally, this approach helps to avoid the duplication of research efforts.

The CWG GMO and its many members have jointly carried out a lot of tasks and preparatory work, which now provide an optimal starting point for developing a comprehensive joint research action in this field: on-going research actions have been analysed including the development of an inventory and future key research priorities will be defined. On this basis of already proven cooperation, common research interests concerning environmental effects and human health will be approached in a joint effort.

Discussions on the various scientific aspects of risk research related to GMOs have revealed that research involves a wide range of disciplines, which would benefit the cooperation of research partners from different countries. Especially research projects focusing on mid- to long-term effects are of great complexity. Multinational cooperation on the scientific level needs considerable support in the area of administration, communication as well as coordination of all involved parties in order to guarantee an adequate knowledge transfer, ensure time management, adjust tasks as well as work packages, and finally avoid duplication of work.

The fruitful transnational cooperation of the CWG GMO – especially the developed list of key future research priorities – could now serve as a basis for the implementation of a specific ERA-Net. Building on the work done by this CWG GMO further networking activities such as a coordination office, information exchange, foresight activities and pilot activities would add considerable value to national research programmes. This would form a valuable basis for e.g. developing joint transnational research calls. The common understanding of future research topics and priorities will provide the basis for shaping such transnational calls.

The following impacts are intended by this ERA-Net:

- Networking of national programmes
- Coordination of resources
- Enhancing the exchange of knowledge and expertise
- Overcome the fragmentation and duplication of research efforts on the national level in Europe through coordination and fostering of transnational activities
- Strengthening the efficiency of complex European research activities

Concerning the question of independent risk research – as mentioned above within the Council Conclusions – publicly funded activities play an important role. However, public research funds need to be targeted effectively and efficiently. Within this context an ERA Net would serve as a starting point for accomplishing relevant scientific research as transnational activity, overcome limited national resources, create a more stringent research agenda, strengthen coordination and therefore avoid duplication of research efforts, as well as addressing and thus contributing to a high level of protection of the environment and human and animal health.

The following members of the CWG GMO particularly support this Letter of Interest: Austria, Denmark, Germany, Poland, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.