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"Gene editing has been a formidable breakthrough", says Michel Thibier, past president of UEAA (Interview)

By European Scientist - 24.11.2020



EDITOR'S CORNER

"Gene editing has been a formidable breakthrough", says Michel Thibier, past president of UEAA (Interview)

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Previously we've published an article about Union Européenne des Académies d'Agriculture calling for a revision of European regulations on genetically modified organisms. Michel Thibier, past President of the UEAA (Union Européenne des Académies d'Agriculture), member of the Académie d'Agriculture de France, Académie Vétérinaire de France and several foreign Academies is answering our questions.

EuropeanScientist : Professor Thibier, as former President of Union of the European Academies of Agriculture, can you introduce this organization? What is its role? What did you accomplish during your Presidency?

Michel Thibier : Thank you. I have been a member of the Steering Committee of the UEAA as representative of the French Académie d'Agriculture since 2014 and President of the UEAA between 2016 and 2018. This Union is the Union of the European Academies of Agriculture hence the Acronym in French: Union Européenne des Académies d'Agriculture. It has been translated into English as

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TOP ARTICLE THIS WEEK

Putting Science Back Into The Nuclear Debate

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As someone that has spent her entire career defending evidence-based science, I am dismayed that too often the scientific facts around the health effects of low dose radiation are ignored.

"The Union of European Academies for Sciences applied to Agriculture, Food and Nature (UEAA)". It was created in Bologna in October 2000 by 14 National Academies, both from European Union members and members from other European countries out of the EU. Such a combination is a very favourable added value to this Union. There are currently members from 29 countries including 7 non-members of the EU, all committed to the advancement of science. Academies and similar Institutions of European countries which are committed to "the Science for the advancement of Agriculture, for Food and Nature may become members of the UEAA". The main objective is "to foster comparative studies on a European scale regarding the development and dissemination of knowledge and the innovation and sustainable development of agriculture, land use and food supply".

The creation of UEAA seems to respond to a real need at the European level and its role is very important for the development of a European research area, providing the agricultural and food sectors with a "platform of scientists and stakeholders that can contribute to the policymaking process".

During my Presidency, the two main events were on one hand a very interesting Symposium held in Paris in 2016 entitled : **Science in agriculture: historical perspectives and prospective insights** and on the other hand a very fruitful discussion at a meeting with the Commissioner for Agriculture Phil Hogan in Brussels (September 2017) about the CAP policy after the UEAA has approved a position paper that we were able to provide to him.



Brussels, 27 9 17 – Commissioner Phil Hogan and the UEAA steering committee members and experts on CAP.

E.S : Recently UEAA has committed to a change in current European Commission's legislation about the New Breeding Technologies (NBT) such as Genome Editing. Can you tell us more?

M.T. : Yes the UEAA has taken a clear Position about the New Breeding Techniques, all the members of the Steering Committee (SC) dealing with these items fully agree in the necessity of evolving the legislation regarding the GMO's that is almost 20 years old, 20 years... a considerable amount of time. And in fact most of the national Academies of these SC members have made such statements about it, such as Romania, Lithuania and others (see the UEAA web site (1)). Of course, when we get altogether like the UEAA does, it gives somewhat more weight to its claims. It is also of notice that UEAA had already

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published a Position Paper in its General Assembly in 2018 in Florence (Italy) which was mostly directed to plants: "UEAA acts to safeguard plant genome editing which is essential to develop sustainable agriculture" (2).

What a contrast between this "no go" at all in the current regulation of GMO's and when one just thinks of the speed with which research progresses. Gene editing has been a formidable breakthrough in being both very precise and cheap and consequently so powerful and hence can be of use to the benefits to the agriculture industry and to the civil society as a whole.

E.S. During May, the European Commission launched the F2F plan. This plan seems to focus primarily on agro-ecology. Do you think that this is a good strategy? What is the UEAA's view on this?

The UEAA per se has not yet discussed that matter, so my answer would be personal. The answer is yes, yes it makes sense. It says that " The Farm to Fork Strategy is at the heart of the European Green Deal aiming to make food systems fair, healthy and environmentally-friendly". I do not think anyone can be against this. But of course having said that, the problems begins ; what are the means to achieve this etc... I, personally, think that the New Breeding Technologies should have all its place in such a strategy. Naturally as I mentioned a couple of weeks ago at a Congress in Bulgaria: "Addressing sustainability for the society, the genome editing is promising to meet the current challenges of food production of quality which is in strong growth and demand globally while preserving the environment".

By the way, these issues of using Gene Editing as a tool to achieve the goals of such plans have been discussed both by the French Académie Vétérinaire (3) and by the French Académie d'Agriculture de France (4). The former has claimed in its Position Paper (June 2019) that there was as a first step, a strong need to promote massive research on those NBT in Europe particularly when comparing with the tremendous efforts in this area made notably by the US or by China, not mentioning countries in South America. The French Academy of Agriculture has widened its scope and its title is : Genome Editing, Ethics and Trust. It makes several recommendations such as the necessary changes of the regulation on GMO's and future GEO's (Genome Edited Organisms) which should rely on these recommendations: (1) Act responsibly, (2) Respect the principle of precaution and (3) Engage the public, Inform the Society, Act transparently.

(1) <https://ueaa.info>

(2) <https://ueaa.info/2018/11/23/ueaa-acts-to-safeguard-plant-genome-editing-which-is-essential-to-develop-sustainable-agriculture/>

(3) <https://academie-veterinaire-defrance.org/prises-de-position/genome-des-animaux-domestiques-modifications-ciblees>

(4) <https://www.academie-agriculture.fr/publications/publications-academie/avis/avis-reecriture-du-genome-ethique-et-confiance>

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