

Galileo satellite system to track animal transports

By DAVID CRONIN

THE Galileo satellite system will be used to track live animal transports under a decision to be taken by EU farm ministers next week (22-23 November).

But attempts to impose a maximum journey time on livestock hauliers have been abandoned amid sharp disagreements between member states.

After Ireland had failed to broker a compromise on the proposed animal welfare regulation earlier this year, the Netherlands – its successor to the EU presidency – indicated it would only revive the dossier if it was certain of clinching a deal.

A Dutch diplomat said that the agreement to be approved by ministers is “a bit of a lowest common denominator compromise but is still worthwhile”.

In July 2003, the European Commission suggested that trucks carrying live animals should not be driven for more than nine hours at a stretch. The journey could then continue, though, provided the animals were rested for 12 hours.

But with big livestock exporters such as France, Italy, Spain and Ireland opposed to such limits, the weighted majority needed to introduce the measures proved elusive.

The Dutch presidency's position that the Galileo system should be used to monitor transports follows evidence that rules on preventing the overcrowding of vehicles carrying animals were being flouted. The Luxembourg authorities have found that Dutch transporters stopped to offload pigs from trucks onto others that were already laden with animals. While the former vehicles returned home, the latter kept on driving.

The Eurogroup for Animal Welfare welcomes the intended use of Galileo but is dismayed that no new rules on journey time, stocking density and the temperature and humidity of trucks used for livestock are forthcoming. Its director Sonja Van Tichelen complained that the 2001 foot-and-mouth disease epidemic illustrated how animals transported for long distances became more vulnerable to contagious illnesses. “We don't want to have to wait for another disease outbreak before the journey time issue is properly addressed,” she said.

Roxane Feller of the Committee of Agricultural Organizations in the European Union (COPA), voiced relief that the main points of the Commission's proposal had been rejected. “We were afraid the scope was so stringent, any transport of animals could have been prohibited,” she said.

Feller declared that COPA was “neither for nor against” the use of Galileo in tracking live transports.

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GEORGE Alogoskoufis is the finance minister of Greece, charged with convincing his peers that Greece will now present reliable budget figures and reduce the deficit below the Stability and Growth Pact's 3% of gross domestic product (GDP) ceiling.

We asked him: How do you intend to produce a credible plan for bringing the deficit, expected to hit 5.3% this year, below 3%?

Alogoskoufis: Our intention, which is reflected in next year's budget, is to bring the deficit down to 2.8% of GDP and so into line with the Stability Pact, during 2005.

We shall be helped in that by the fact that the expenditure we had to make for the Olympics is non-recurring.

So we shall essentially not be repeating a large part of the expenditures we had this year in preparation for the games. This will save us around 1% of GDP.

We shall get roughly another 1% of GDP from slowing down the rate of



Photograph: www.alogoskoufis.gr
Alogoskoufis: very optimistic

growth of other public expenditure through a mixture of further privatization, economizing on interest costs and other revenue measures.

The expenditure savings involve slowing the growth of wages and salaries in the public sector.

But we are not going to be cutting jobs.

Rather we will slow down the growth of employment.

We expect the economy to keep growing by about 3.9% partly through the expansion of tourism and exports and we expect the public sector to grow far less than this.

Five states to defy lifting of GM food ban

By ANNA McLAUHLIN

THE European Commission is set to clash with member states at a meeting on 29 November when it asks them to lift restrictions on genetically modified (GM) food.

Five member states – Austria, France, Germany, Greece and Luxembourg – have taken advantage of a 1990 EU law which allows them to restrict or ban the use of a GM product if there are “justifiable” reasons to believe it could put human health or the environment at risk.

Although the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) has claimed that the bans, which concern five types of GM oilseed rape and maize, are based on insufficient evidence, they have never been lifted.

Now the EU is coming under pressure because of a World Trade Organization (WTO) case filed by the US, Canada and Argentina in 2003. With the backing of 20 other countries, they are urging Europe to open its markets to GM products.

Under a law passed in 2001, member states either had to provide new evidence to keep the bans in place or withdraw them.

In 2003 the Commission demanded such evidence from the five member states, but only Greece and Austria submitted their research.

The EFSA rejected both sets of data. The three other states have yet to deliver their findings. Germany will make a presentation to the Commission at the meeting on 29 November, an official said, and France is still conducting studies into the risks posed by GMs.

“No member state has provided new evidence that these GM products are dangerous and so the bans have to be lifted somehow,” said a Commission source.

The EU executive is expected to ask member states to vote on whether or not the five can keep their embargo in place, with a qualified majority needed for success. If there is no majority, environment ministers will be asked to vote at an upcoming Council.

But the member states are ready for battle. An official from Austria's agricultural ministry told *European Voice*: “We still think that we have some arguments against the cultivation of GM maize. We have to make further studies and wait until we have even more evidence but, until then,



Photograph: Monsanto

Concerns: still remain over GM foods' effect on people's health

we will hold our position.” And a German official said: “We have scientific expertise we will present at the meeting and then we will see. But we are convinced that our doubts are realistic.”

Greece is also expected to uphold its opposition. “The Greek government is and always has been entirely against GM food and we don't expect to change this position,” said a Greek official. “But... it is always difficult to know what will happen.”

Adrian Bebb of Friends of the Earth said that the Commission was simply

“caving into pressure” from the WTO. “The Commission should be standing up for these bans, recognizing that there are doubts surrounding the safety of GM food and investigating them,” he said.

Officials at the meeting will also discuss whether or not to approve imports of a GM maize produced by US company Monsanto called MON 863. Since the six-year-long ban on approvals ended in June, the EU has approved 18 GMs for cultivation, import or use in animal feed or food.

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The world waits as multilateralists resign from Bush administration

By PETE SWEENEY

PRESIDENT George W. Bush has accepted the resignations of six cabinet members. So far his proposed replacements are administration insiders. Colin Powell, the administration's multilateralist, has been replaced by National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice. The appointment may be an attempt by Bush to balance power between the Department of Defense and the Department of State. During the first administration, Powell enjoyed little leverage at the White House. Rice, on

the other hand, enjoys intimate access to the president and has been a consistent supporter of the Israeli government and the war in Iraq. Rice is to be replaced by Stephen Hadley, her deputy national security advisor.

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, while travelling in Ecuador this week, told the press that he has yet to discuss his future with President Bush and, it is said, he wishes to retain his post. But whether he will keep his current neo-conservative subordinates, blamed for significant planning lapses while preparing to reconstruct Iraq, remains an open question.

Under Secretary of Defense for policy, Douglas J. Feith, whom US General Tommy Franks (a potential replacement for Rumsfeld should he step down) famously called “the stupidest guy on the face of the earth”, may go. Feith has been widely blamed for policies that left the US without a plan for the occupation of Iraq. He allegedly called the Geneva Convention “law in the service of terror”.

Attorney General John Ashcroft is gone, replaced by Alberto Gonzales, legal counsel to the president and author of the controversial

memorandum which suggested that US definitions of torture could be relaxed to allow more abusive forms of interrogation.

Other resignations include Rod Paige of the Department of Education, Spence Abraham of the Department of Energy, Ann Veneman of the Department of Agriculture and Don Evans of the Department of Commerce. Domestic policy advisor Margaret Spelling has been nominated to replace Paige at education.

Eleven cabinet members remain in their posts at present.