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SUBJECT: ITALY/BIOTEC...

Classified By: CHARGE D'AFFAIRES EMIL SKODON,
FOR REASONS 1.5(B) (D)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Ref A describes Italian Agriculture Minister Alemanno's latest gambit to effectively ban biotech crop cultivation in Italy by pushing through an extremely restrictive coexistence decree-law. Given the likely negative consequences of this proposal, not least upon U.S. seed exports to Italy, Ambassador Sembler raised strong objections to Alemanno's approach in separate meetings this week with Foreign Minister Frattini (Nov. 10), with PM Berlusconi's top advisor, Prime Ministry Under Secretary Gianni Letta, and with the Prime Minister directly in a phone call from Letta's office (Nov. 11). Letta and the PM assured the Ambassador that, either at the technical level or the political level, the draft Alemanno decree-law would be blocked. End Summary.

Meeting with Frattini

¶2. (C) As reported Ref B, Ambassador raised Minister Alemanno's draft coexistence proposal in the context of a Nov. 10 discussion with FM Frattini of the Italian EU Presidency. Frattini said he understood that Alemanno favored taking a harder line on biotech than EU regulations required. Frattini further offered that, to the extent Alemanno's proposals went further than EU-agreed regulations, he, as Foreign Minister, could argue within the Council of Ministers that Italian policy should stay in line with EU norms.

Meeting with Letta, Berlusconi on Speaker-Phone

¶3. (C) On November 11, the Ambassador, accompanied by AgAtt and Ecmin, discussed U.S. concerns over the draft decree-law for 30 minutes with PM Berlusconi's closest advisor, Prime Ministry Under Secretary Gianni Letta. Despite the fact that the proposed draft has been circulating among Italian ministries for several days, Letta appeared to be genuinely unaware of its existence. However, he quickly grasped its significance. Letta commented that Alemanno had been under clear pressure from the EU Commission to lift the so-called Amato Decree (banning four varieties of EU-approved GM corn).

"But it sounds to me like he's going to do it in a way that increases, not decreases, restrictions on biotechnology," Letta added. Ambassador emphatically agreed. Following a couple of quick phone calls, Letta told the Ambassador that the decree-law was not on the agenda for this week's Council of Ministers meeting, so no action was imminent.

¶4. (C) Letta then picked up the phone and made another call --this time directly to Prime Minister Berlusconi. Letta summarized the issue at hand, put the phone on "speaker" mode, and passed the receiver to Ambassador Sembler. After conveying his continuing support for President Bush's efforts

to spread democracy and wishing the Ambassador well on his trip to Washington for President Ciampi's visit, Berlusconi then promised that he would not let Minister Alemanno's draft decree, as it had been described to him, pass through the Council of Ministers. The Ambassador offered his sincere thanks.

¶5. (C) In concluding the discussion, Letta predicted that ""technical or procedural"" mechanisms could be found to derail the Alemanno draft. But he reiterated that the move could, and would, be blocked at the political level, if that became necessary.

Comment

¶6. (C) We are greatly encouraged by Berlusconi's and Letta's rapid, seemingly decisive response to the Ambassador's demarche. They provide, we believe, a high degree of probability that Alemanno's latest gambit will be sidetracked. We fully expect, however, that the Ag Minister will try to find other means to realize his vision of a biotech-free Italy. Alemanno is soon expected to issue the Ministry of Agriculture's 2004 seed circular stating that the tolerance for biotech in conventional seeds is zero. The seed testing protocol of the circular is expected to stipulate a miniscule threshold of 0.1% for biotech in conventional seeds.

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