

Belgium



The epicentre of European stevia research

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Belgium - The epicentre of European stevia research

For many years, large amounts of stevia were imported into Belgium. For example, there was a import volume of nine tons of stevia leaves in the year 1989.¹ This situation lasted until the mid-nineties. Then, stevia was forbidden by the Belgian government. In 1997, the sale of living stevia plants was forbidden, a ban on the sale of stevia leaves and stevioside followed in 2000. Nevertheless, an important centre of stevia research formed in Belgium. This institution is the "European Stevia Centrum" (ESC) at the Catholic University of Leuven.²

In particular the head of the ESC, a professor named Jan M.C. Geuns, rendered outstanding services to the research on the stevia plant. In cooperation with a man named Peter Grosser from Germany and Mónica Lorenzo of the Spanish chemical industry enterprise "Anagalide", he founded a non-profit organisation named "European Stevia Association" (EUSTAS) in 2006. Even though the organisation has its headquarters in Spain, nearly all its activities take place in Leuven. Mr. Geuns has filed many petitions to the European Union since 2006. Among them, there was an application for the legalization of stevia plants and dried stevia plants³, as well as an application for the legalization of steviol glycosides as food supplements, both of them filed in 2007.⁴

The EUSTAS does not only file petitions, it also tries to assist and coordinate "all activities focussing on research and health in relation to Stevia rebaudiana and related compounds".⁵ This includes the development of a European seal of quality for stevioside and the realisation of informative meetings and conferences. Therefore, the Catholic University of Leuven already staged three conferences which examined the topics "The safety of stevioside"⁶ (2006), "Steviol glycosides: technical and pharmacological aspects"⁷ (2008) and "Stevia in Europe"⁸ (2009).

Furthermore, the ESC tries to publish reports about researches. Several studies which showed the innocuousness of stevia and its components were published in cooperation

1 Anonymous [2008]

2 Geuns, Jan M.C. [2002]

3 EUSTAS [2007a]

4 EUSTAS [2007b]

5 EUSTAS [2006]

6 Geuns, Jan M.C. [2006]

7 Geuns, Jan M.C. [2008]

8 Geuns, Jan M.C. [2009]

with scientists of the ESC. These studies were conducted after stevia was administered to fledglings and pigs. When he was asked about the potential toxicity or mutagenicity of the components of stevia, Prof. Geuns said that the innocuousness would be "complete" if stevia is used as a sweetener, which means it would be used in relatively small amounts.⁹

At the moment, a major focus of the EUSTAS is the development of a control system for stevia and its components. This system is to be aimed at guaranteeing the purity and quality of stevia products so the consumers can be sure that the consumption of stevia will not harm their health. Since EUSTAS anticipates the European approval of stevia in the year 2010, the organisation recognizes this control system as strongly essential. By the time of the approval, everything should be prepared to create a fast supply of high-quality stevia products to the consumers.¹⁰

9 Geuns, Jan M.C. [2002]

10 Halliday, Jess [2009]

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