NEWS RELEASE

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On behalf of the GM-free Ireland Network
www.gmfreeireland.org

EU CONSIDERS BAN ON GM ANIMAL FEED

Food Safety Authority of Ireland urged to test GM maize for antibiotic resistant gene

EU Countries will vote tomorrow (Friday) on a Commission proposal to demand certification for all maize-based animal feeds from the USA.

The vote is being taken, because 1,000 tonnes of an illegal, untested and potentially dangerous genetically modified (GM) maize grown in the USA have entered the EU as contaminated seed, animal feed, and food over the past 4 years (1).

The experimental GMO maize, known as BT10, contains an antibiotic resistant gene prohibited for commercial use by the European Food Safety Authority (2). The gene is intact and codes for Ampicillin, a common antibiotic penicillin drug used to treat bacterial infections. Scientists warn that human consumption of the GMO maize poses a public health risk, as the Bt10 gene could produce antibiotic resistant superbugs.

Bt10 is an experimental crop and has not been permitted for human consumption anywhere in the world. The genetically modified maize is highly illegal. Only licenced GMOs are allowed onto the market and into the food or feed chain. But the U.S. authorities did not inform the Commission that Bt10 contains the gene conferring resistance against the antibiotic. It was only on March 31 that this information was given officially to the Commission by the Swiss agri-biotech firm Syngenta, which owns the patent on the GMO maize.

Despite repeated demands from the EC, Syngenta refuses to disclose the corn's genetic makeup. Without this information, EU governments can not test how wide the contamination is, which food products contain it, or who may have eaten it. The EU Health Commission spokesman said he has no way to determine whether the imports have stopped or where the corn may have ended up (3).

The EU imports 3.5 million tonnes of genetically modified corn gluten from the US each year, for use as animal feed. It is a mixture of different types of EU approved genetically modified maize so it is impossible to detect the produce contaminated with Bt-10 without the information requested from Syngenta. But repeated refusals by the Swiss firm to hand over information have raised tensions in Brussels. Under EU law, a biotech firm is responsible for contamination.

Last week, the US Department of Agriculture imposed a $ 375,000 dollar fine on Syngenta over the unauthorised release of the GMO in the United States. In a related move, the Vermont Senate gave nearly unanimous approval to a bill designed to make seed manufacturers liable for the impacts of genetically modified crops.

"The European Commission deplores the fact that a GMO which has not been authorized through the EU's comprehensive legislative framework for GMOs, nor by any other country, has been imported into the EU," said EU Health and Consumer Protection Commissoner Markos Kyprianou.

The vote to ban the maize in Europe will be taken tomorrow by an EC Standing Committee on the Food Chain and Animal Health.

The GM-free Ireland Network has written to the Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI) demanding "an urgent investigation" into whether the unapproved GMO maize has been illegally imported into Ireland, and if so, which foods contain it. "Irish farmers and consumers are concerned that this may have found its way into food and animal feed. The FSAI needs to urgently reassure us that this maize has not been imported into Ireland. If it was, the FSAI must ensure that any contaminated products are withdrawn immediately, including animal feed."

GM-free Ireland has also requested the Department of Agriculture and Teagasc to disclose whether they have in the past or are currently engaged in the growing of any genetically modified maize in their laboratories in Ireland, and if so, whether they have implemented any necessary monitoring and surveillance measures to detect the dangerous Bt10 maize and destroy it if found.

GM-free Ireland spokesperson Michael O'Callaghan said "There may well be food products on the shelves of Irish supermarkets which contain concentrations of illegal Bt10 maize. These products need to be identified and withdrawn from sale immediately. All imports of maize and maize products from the US into Ireland must be stopped while the investigation is underway, and then only resumed when a tight and properly funded GM testing and monitoring system is in place."

Friends of the Earth GM Campaigner Clare Oxborrow said, "The agri-biotech industry is out of control. For four years Syngenta failed to notice that they were selling farmers an unapproved GM seed. How are consumers and farmers supposed to trust them to produce our food in the future? This case makes a complete mockery of the U.S. regulatory system for GM crops. To make matters worse the US government has known about this accident for months and together with Syngenta decided to keep it a secret until now."

Lindsay Keenan, a Greenpeace campaigner in the UK, said: "It is unbelievable that Syngenta, after four months of preparation for releasing this information, should say that it Bt10 variety which contains the antibiotic resistant gene is physically identical to its Bt11 variety which does not contain the gene. This case exposes the basic unpredictability of GMOs, the incompetence of Syngenta to handle GMO seeds safely, the complete lack of regulatory controls in the US, and the lack of implementation of controls in the EU."

At an Oireachatas briefing in December 2004, the Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI) claimed that GM animal feed and foods pose no health risk to Irish consumers. The CEO of the Food Safety Authority of Ireland, Dr. John O'Brien, is a former director of the International Life Sciences Institute (ILLS), a Washington-based biotech & tobacco industry front group. The ILLS was accused of infiltrating scientific committees of the World Health Organisation and the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation in order to downgrade tobacco health warnings and downplay the evidence that high levels of sugar in junk foods cause childhood obesity and diabetes.

Upon repeated questioning by TDs in December 2004, the FSAI admitted it does not have the resources to evaluate the risks of GM animal feed and food itself, and depends on what it is told by the European Food Safety Authority. According to a detailed report by Friends of the Earth, entiled "Throwing Caution to the Wind", the European Food Safety Authority has been infiltrated by biotech vested interests and can no longer be trusted (4).

The vast majority of European food brands, retailers and consumers refuse GM food; 100 regional governments and 3,500 local authorities in 22 EU countries prohibit GMO crops. Amidist rapidly growing concern about the loss of EU market share for Irish beef fed on GMO animal feed, Irish farmers will declare 1,000 GMO-free zones next Friday 22 April, Earth Day 2005 (5).

Background information

The scientific journal Nature revealed on 22 March 2005 that an experimental strain of a genetically modified maize, not approved for human or animal consumption, had mistakenly been sold to farmers in the United States and planted for over four years. The journal reported that the world's largest agro-chemical company, Syngenta, had informed the US Government about the incident in December 2004. According to Nature, since then the company and regulators were involved in "months of discussion over what should be done about the error, and how and when the information should be released to the public." The maize in question is called Bt10

What has happened?

Syngenta claims that some Bt10 seeds that were kept back for research purposes were mistaken for another GM maize, called Bt11, and inserted into five seed production lines, and sold to farmers since 2001. Unlike Bt10, the Bt11 maize has been marketed in the US from 1996. In Europe processed products of Bt11, such as maize oil and flour, have been permitted since 1998, but the whole corn has only been permitted since May 2004.

Syngenta claim that about 150 square kilometres of the bt10 crop was planted over four years, which they say, represents only 0.01% of the maize planted in the USA over the same period. However, Syngenta have not produced any information to the public to confirm this is the case.

Misleading the world

Bt10 maize is an experimental crop that has been genetically engineered to kill certain pest insects by producing a pesticidal toxin. Since it has never been commercialised there is very little information in the public domain about its genetic modification. Initially, Syngenta claimed that, "Bt10 and Bt11 are physically identical", and that "Therefore, there is no change to the food, health and environmental profile of the corn." This analysis was quickly mimicked by Governments around the world. The US Environment Protection Agency stated that, "The US Government is also communicating with our major trading partners to ensure they understand there are no food safety or environmental concerns." The European Commission stated to the press that Bt10 was "genetically the same as Bt-11 which is already approved in the EU", and the UK Government reiterated that the US Government "has therefore concluded that they have no safety concerns."

However, Non-Government-Organisations (NGOs) were quick to point out that Bt10 contains one or more copies of the ampicillin (amp) resistance marker gene (beta lactamase), which is not present in Bt11. In fact, Syngenta used bt10 as a "positive control" to show that bt11 did not contain the amp gene in their application for EU approval of the Bt11.

This therefore makes Bt10 a very different GMO than Bt11. Since ampicillin is a widely used clinical antibiotic, and EFSA, Codex Alimentarius, FAO-WHO and many medical and scientific experts have recommended against the use of genes for such antibiotics in GM foods, it would certainly not be licenced in the EU.

Another Starlink?

The last major incident of an unapproved GM maize inadvertently entering the food chain happened in 1999 with a maize called Starlink. Although planted on a relatively small area, maize products worldwide were contaminated. In the US a quarter of maize seed companies not selling or growing Starlink ended up with Starlink contamination, resulting in a huge Government buy-back. In addition, although Starlink was a fodder maize it was reportedly found in sweet-corn and popcorn, indicating that cross-pollination was widespread. Starlink is still being found today. In February this year, civil society groups found Starlink in Central America in consignments of food aid. How wide has Bt10 gone? Without proper testing at a national level no one can say.

ENDS

ATTRIBUTION

Michael O'Callaghan, Co-ordinator, GM-free Ireland Network
tel (0404) 43 885
mobile 087 799 4761
email: mail@gmfreeireland.org
www.gmfreeireland.org

NOTES TO EDITORS

(1) About 20,000 tonnes of contaminated maize may have come into Europe over the past four years, and Syngenta claims not to know where it has gone or which canned, frozen and processed sweetcorn products might contain it. It might even be contained in baby food. The company has refused to name those countries which have imported the contaminated and illegal grain for food use, in spite of repeated requests. All it has said so far is that "up to 10 kg of Bt10 seed may have been exported inadvertently as Bt11 for research purposes to Spain and France."

(2) Bt10 is a discontinued GM sweetcorn line containing genes inserted for herbicide tolerance, as well as toxins lethal to insects and also antibiotic resistance marker genes. It is thought to be a "failed" variety which was unstable. It has never been through an authorisations process either in the US or Europe. Import of Bt10 into the EU -- in whatever form and for whatever purpose -- is strictly illegal.

(3) Syngenta has refused to give a full characterization of the unauthorized GM variety, which means that products that might be derived from it cannot be tested for Bt10. Neither has it yet provided a specific detection method for use by the relevant authorities. See Press release from Genetic ID (Europe) GENETIC ID RESPONDS TO INDUSTRY NEED FOR Bt10 DETECTION (Augsburg, Germany, 31 March 2005) info-europe@genetic-id.com

(4) See the review of the EFSA and its work on GM foods and crops (Throwing Caution to the Wind) published by Friends of the Earth Europe in November 2004. Download at www.gmfreeireland.org/resources/documents/FOE/EFSAreport.pdf.

(5) See www.gmfreeireland.org/zones/index.php