



Gonzog Science

Anomalies, Heresies,
and Conspiracies

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Consuming engineered food is almost officially mandatory

Regular readers of our column know that we think genetic engineering in agriculture is a terrible idea.

In contrast to conventional plant breeding, genetic engineering is a process whereby an organism is altered in the laboratory by isolating, copying, and multiplying genes or DNA. This artificial or modified genetic material is transferred from one species to another, inserted into the genomes of cells or embryos.

The resultant genetically modified organisms (GMOs) have thereby bypassed the controls of the reproductive process. They are organisms developed solely through artificial, laboratory manipulation of genetic material. The risks include contaminating non-GMO crops with unwanted genetic material.

How close are we to a world where growing and eating GMOs is mandatory? Or are we already there?

Here's a round-up of recent developments, starting with a victory for the little guy in September, from a legal battle spearheaded by the Center for Food Safety:

The United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit has upheld a nationwide ban on the planting of genetically-engineered (GE) Roundup Ready alfalfa pending a full Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). The Court determined that the planting of genetically modified alfalfa can result in potentially irreversible harm to organic and conventional varieties of crops, damage to the environment, and economic harm to farmers.

Minnesotans will recall that the Ojibwe won a state bill in 2007 that, among other things, would require a full EIS before any open-air testing of GE wild rice.

This past November saw a string of stories about GE foods. The Hawaii County Council upheld a ban on engineered taro and coffee on the Big Island. This represents a great victory for the people of Hawaii who, in their efforts to protect culturally significant and high-value crops in their state legislature, have been repeatedly stymied by the biotech industry.

The people of New Mexico face a similar situation now that the eyes of biotech have turned towards engineering chile, in spite of the clearly stated desire of traditional farmers to not have the technology forced on them.

The fact that some crops and some regions are not

appropriate for genetic engineering is a mainstream political issue.

The contamination of traditional corn in the Mexican heartland has been confirmed in a study that largely validates a similar, controversial result published in *Nature* in 2001. Segregating engineered crops from non-engineered varieties is a technological impossibility.

But what's all the hullabaloo? Isn't genetic engineering safe? That depends on who you talk to.

A study commissioned by the Austrian government showed GE maize fed to mice significantly reduced their fertility over three to four breeding cycles within one generation. This is a major development, as long-term animal feeding studies are in short supply.

The Bush administration is so unconcerned about any health effects that they're trying to slip through radical changes at the federal level that will essentially make eating engineered food unavoidable.

The proposed new regulations are a bonanza of loopholes and reduced oversight to the biotech industry that will have the effect of spreading GMO contamination far and wide.

Perhaps the most insulting to the public is this disgraceful last minute re-write of US Department of Agriculture (USDA) regulations:

In FR Doc. E8-23584, published on October 9, 2008...make the following correction: On page 60037, first column...correct "No State or local laws or regulations would be preempted by this rule" to read "All State and local laws or regulations that are inconsistent with this rule will be preempted."

Yes, the USDA snuck in a last-minute "correction" that bars any state or local regulation of GMOs that are more protective than its own weak rule.

Does this include Minnesota's law on wild rice and the Hawaii County government's ban on engineered taro and coffee? Will President-elect Obama make good on his campaign pledge to label engineered food? Labeling would be an imperfect solution on the best of days and, if he does it at all, it will take years to get to and more years to implement, in all likelihood.

Local and state governments should retain the right to regulate engineered crops as their communities see fit. If these rights are lost, we should fight like hell to get them back.




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