

Group Fights Genetically Engineered Food Sold Secretly

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A public-interest group is in the midst of a heated battle to secure the people's "right to know" what is being done to scientifically alter their food by companies selling products such as genetically-engineered salmon.

Last May, the California Assembly Health Committee passed AB 88, sponsored by Assemblyman Jared Huffman, which requires all genetically engineered salmon sold in California to be clearly labeled. The bill now moves to the Appropriations Committee where those members will decide if AB 88 should go to full Assembly for the final vote.

"We need to persuade Appropriations Committee members to vote in favor of AB 88!" states Margherita Pagni, the director of strategic relations at the Institute for Responsible Technology.

The first question asked by many is: Are there any health risks to consuming genetically-modified food products?

["The American Academy of Environmental Medicine](#) (AAEM) doesn't think so. The Academy reported that "Several animal studies indicate serious health risks associated with GM food," including infertility, immune problems, accelerated aging, faulty insulin regulation, and changes in major organs and the gastrointestinal system. The AAEM asked physicians to advise patients to avoid GM foods," states the Institute for Responsible Technology.

NATIONAL CONSEQUENCES

President Barack Obama's health officials will soon decide whether genetically engineered fishes are safe to eat. The fish, a creation of Aqua Bounty Technologies Inc scientists, is engineered to grow almost twice as fast as traditional fish such as salmon.

The Obama administration believes this development will help the environment while increasing the food supply and costs. However, consumer advocacy groups and food safety experts fear that manipulating fish genes may have the opposite effect and the side effects of human consumption of altered fish are still a mystery with no scientific data existing to show it is safe the seafood will be.

However, opponents complain that the Obama administration is operating in secrecy to push the introduction of a genetically-altered food supply. As it moves to approve the first genetically engineered animal for human consumption, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is evaluating the product as a veterinary drug to avoid public disclosure of the process.

Without question, the advent of genetically altered fish marks a milestone in the history of food. Nearly every other food group, from meat to vegetables to fruit, has been cross-bred almost beyond recognition after millennia of human agriculture. Fish, by contrast, are mostly harvested from the wild, shaped only by the forces of evolution, according to the Organic Consumers Association, a non-profit, non-partisan organization.

The government agency responsible for protecting public health and safety plans to sign off on a hugely controversial product, genetically modified fish, but wants to keep the gory details from Americans who will eventually eat it.

But some groups say little is known about hazards -- such as allergies or potential digestive problems. And they have criticized the FDA for not releasing any data. The agency

has said it hopes to make data public soon but that by law it does not have to release it until two days before the meeting.

Among the many examples is a controversial FDA-approved cervical cancer vaccine (Gardasil) linked to the deaths of dozens of girls and adverse reactions in thousands more. Pharmaceutical giant Merck manufactures Gardasil and the FDA has gone out of its way to cater to the powerful drug company by expediting expanded approval of the vaccine, which has been promoted as a sort of miracle shot that can prevent certain strains of cervical cancer caused by Human Papillomavirus (HPV).

To keep information secret, the FDA is assessing the fish as a [veterinary drug](#) because it allows the agency to deliberate behind closed doors. The classification also permits critical data and research submitted by the company that will create the product to remain confidential.

The only difference between the natural and enhanced salmon is that the modified species is given a special gene and growth hormone that makes it develop twice as fast. The Massachusetts company (Aqua Bounty Technologies Inc.) that came up with the idea claims its specially engineered version is identical to the Atlantic salmon except for the speed of its growth.

Rebecca Goldberg of the Environmental Defense Fund, for instance, has warned that genetically altered fish could be so tough that they out-compete wild fish for limited food and spawning areas. Alternately, the fish could interbreed with wild fish, changing their genetic makeup in unpredictable ways.

Those willing to take a chance on this lab creation should at the very least have full disclosure from the government agency that approves it. Not that the FDA is trustworthy. The scandal-plagued agency is notorious for compromising public health to protect the profits of companies that pay it hundreds of millions of dollars in “fees” to get their products approved.

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