

Wholesale Approval of Genetically Engineered Foods

Obama Administration Disappoints/Angers Public

Agent Orange Herbicide Ingredient Would be Widely Used

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Over the holidays, the United States Department of Agriculture announced its approval of a novel strain of genetically engineered corn, developed by Monsanto, purportedly being “drought tolerant.”

Despite receiving nearly 45,000 public comments in opposition to this particular genetically engineered (GE) corn variety (and only 23 comments in favor), the Obama administration gave Monsanto the green light to release its newest GE corn variety freely into the environment and American food supply, without any governmental oversight or safety tracking.

“President Obama and Secretary of Agriculture Vilsack just sent a clear message to the American public that they do not care about our concerns with genetically engineered food and their questionable safety, adverse environmental impacts, and detrimental effects on farmers, especially organic farmers,” says Mark A. Kastel, Senior Farm Policy Analyst with The Cornucopia Institute.

“This is just the latest in a string of approvals of genetically engineered crops, and it is clear that despite campaign promises of *change* from Obama, he has not had the courage to stand strong against the powerful agribusiness and biotechnology lobbies,” Kastel added.

In addition to its announcement approving Monsanto’s newest GE corn variety, the USDA also opened a 60-day public comment period for two additional petitions – one for Monsanto’s GE soybean containing higher levels of an omega-3 fatty acid, that does not naturally occur in soybeans, and the other from Dow AgroSciences for corn that has been genetically engineered to better resist the poisonous herbicide 2,4-D.

The public can comment on Dow's 2,4-D corn at:

<http://www.regulations.gov/#!documentDetail;D=APHIS-2010-0103-0001>

While the USDA attempts to assure the public that 2,4-D is safe, scientists have raised serious concerns about the safety of this herbicide, which was used as a key ingredient in “Agent Orange,” used to defoliate forests and croplands in the Vietnam War.

2,4-D is a chlorophenoxy herbicide, and scientists around the world have reported increased cancer risks in association with its use, especially for soft tissue sarcoma and malignant lymphoma. Four separate studies in the United States reported an association with chlorophenoxy herbicide use and non-Hodgkin lymphoma.

"The concern is that, just like Monsanto's genetically engineered corn that is resistant to RoundUp™ (glyphosate) herbicide, the approval of a cultivar resistant to 2,4-D will cause an exponential increase in the use of this toxic agrichemical," Kastel stated.

Research by the EPA found that babies born in counties with high rates of 2,4-D application to farm fields were significantly more likely to be born with birth defects of the respiratory and circulatory systems, as well as defects of the musculoskeletal system like clubfoot, fused digits and extra digits. These birth defects were 60% to 90% more likely in counties with higher 2,4-D application rates.

The results also showed a higher likelihood of birth defects in babies conceived in the spring, when herbicide application rates peak.

In its petition, Dow AgroSciences states that 2,4-D is increasingly important for chemical farmers because of the presence of weeds that have developed resistance to glyphosate, as a result of the widespread use of Monsanto's genetically engineered glyphosate-resistant crops.

When Monsanto introduced glyphosate, it was touted as a safer and less toxic alternative to herbicides like 2,4-D. Now, an emerging body of scientific literature is raising serious concerns about the safety of glyphosate as well.

"The concern that the use of GE crops, which are resistant to particular herbicides, leads to the creation of 'superweeds' is now shown to be valid and serious, as even the chemical companies now recognize and admit this is a problem," says Kastel.

"In 2012 the USDA is proposing approving a new GE corn variety that is resistant to a different toxic herbicide, escalating the toxic treadmill in chemical-dependent agriculture," said Jay Feldman, Executive Director of Beyond Pesticides. "This is nothing more than a band-aid solution to a serious problem, and will only give rise to more superweeds, more herbicide pollution in our environment, more herbicide poisoning, while likely leading to the need for even more toxic herbicides a couple of years down the line. This foolish circle has to end," Feldman said.

Farm research groups like The Cornucopia Institute are also concerned with the impact of genetically engineered crops on organic farmers, whose organic crops are already at risk of contamination with Monsanto's unnatural DNA, from pollen drift.

In its Environmental Assessment of the "drought tolerant" Monsanto corn, the USDA conceded that gene flow of corn pollen is likely to occur. It is well-established that corn pollen travels, and pollen from genetically engineered plants will contaminate natural corn plants.

"The irony, of course, is that organic fields and crops are much more drought tolerant, because common sense and field trials show healthy and biologically active organic soil retains moisture much better than tired and depleted soil on conventional monoculture farms, and organic crops are healthier and more robust than conventional crops," said Charlotte Vallaey, a researcher at Cornucopia.

"But Monsanto cannot profit from healthy soil and healthy organic crops, while they can profit from genetically engineering, patenting, and owning new life forms," Vallaey continued. "It's unfortunate that the Obama administration is equally misguided by supporting Monsanto and Dow's petitions and ignoring citizens' demand for an immediate end to approving these genetically engineered crops in our food supply."

More:

The newest genetically engineered soybean petitioned by Monsanto is one of the first to claim a public health benefit, since it has been engineered to contain higher levels of an omega-3 fatty acid, stearidonic acid.

"Genetically engineering a ubiquitous monoculture crop to contain higher levels of just one particular nutrient will not solve our public health crisis, and might even exacerbate it, since a healthy diet is about much more than simply increasing the levels of one particular omega-3 fatty acid," said Vallaey. "It's another band-aid solution that will do little to address the root of the problem with our nation's "nutrition" problem, which is people eating too many processed foods containing corn and soybean derivatives, and not eating a varied diet of nutrient-rich wholesome foods."

The USDA surveyed 43 foods and compared their nutritional content in 1999 to original testing that took place in 1950. Half of the nutrients measured declined by 6 to 38%. "Industrial agriculture, as compared to organics, have relegated our diets to a lot of empty calories," Vallaey added.

On the campaign trail in 2007, the President said that genetically modified foods should be labeled because Americans "should know what they are buying."

Despite promises of change, Mr. Obama appointed former Iowa Governor Tom Vilsack as USDA Secretary, who had gained notoriety in agricultural circles after being named Governor of the Year by the Biotechnology Industry Organization.

Obama subsequently appointed two pro-GMO agrochemical company lobbyists to powerful positions in his administration. Michael Taylor, a former Monsanto lobbyist, became food czar at the Food and Drug Administration. Islam Siddiqui, a lifelong pesticide lobbyist and GMO advocate, was appointed Chief Agricultural Negotiator.

These appointments revealed the tight grip that Monsanto and other biotech corporations have on elected officials, and raised further doubts regarding the promises for change by the current administration.

Adding insult to injury, the Obama USDA's timing for announcing notices related to genetic engineering mirrors the Bush administration's approach of burying the news and actively discouraging public participation. The FDA declared GMO salmon was safe, on the Friday before the long Labor Day weekend in 2010.

Then the USDA made their highly controversial decision to deregulate GMO alfalfa during the busy holiday season of 2010. Their decision is being challenged by The Cornucopia Institute, Beyond Pesticides, Center for Food Safety and scores of other plaintiffs in federal court.

More recently, the announcement that Monsanto's newest genetically engineered corn had been deregulated, and that Monsanto and Dow had petitioned for additional approval of GMO corn and soybeans, came the week between Christmas and the New Year Day holiday.

"When attempting to bury controversial news, it's not uncommon for the government to issue press releases on days when the public isn't paying attention and the news media is on vacation," noted Cornucopia's Mark Kastel. "The Bush administration did the same thing when announcing that bovine spongiform encephalopathy (mad cow disease) had entered the domestic food chain."

Citizens can comment on the proposed approval of Dow's [2,4-D tolerant corn](#) and Monsanto's [stearidonic acid soybeans](#) until February 27, 2012.

An online petition opposing Dow's 2,4-D corn variety, which will be sent to President Obama and Secretary Vilsack, can be [signed here](#).

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The Cornucopia Institute, a Wisconsin-based nonprofit farm policy research group, is dedicated to the fight for economic justice for the family-scale farming community. Their Organic Integrity Project acts as a corporate and governmental watchdog assuring that no compromises to the credibility of organic farming methods and the food it produces are made in the pursuit of profit. Their web page can be viewed at www.cornucopia.org.