



Monthly Bulletin
on *Genetic Engineering*
January 2012

For details:

Southern Action on Genetic Engineering (SAGE)

101, Kishan Residency, Street no: 5, Begumpet, Hyderabad- 500016,
Andhra Pradesh, India.

Email: ddshyderabad@gmail.com

Net edition: www.ddsindia.com



Contents

SAGE CHRONICLE

NATIONAL

- ◆ Of seeds, parliament, prayers and the Gita
- ◆ Another Bt-cotton variant falls to fraud charges

GLOBAL

- ◆ Genetically Engineered Safety Act: The New Food Safety Bill?

GE FOOD

- ◆ Food Chain of Fools
- ◆ Traditional Farming can Save Threatened species, Study finds

GE & AGRICULTURE

- ◆ Under Industry Pressure, USDA Works to Speed Approval of Monsanto's Genetically Engineered Crops

ADDITIONAL LINKS:

Bugs may be resistant to genetically modified corn

http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/nationworld/2017109307_apusbiotechcornatrisk.html

Safety Concerns Linger Around Genetically Modified Salmon

<http://www.npr.org/blogs/thesalt/2011/12/12/143588609/safety-concerns-linger-around-genetically-modified-salmon>

***Of seeds, parliament, prayers and the Gita* PUBLIC REPORTER**

Why we need to block MNCs looking to sell our farmers GM seeds

[Rakesh Manchanda](#) | December 22 2011

<http://governancenow.com/news/public-reporter/seeds-parliament-prayers-and-gita>

Farm labour shortage triggers herbicide usage

<http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/industry-and-economy/agri-biz/article2732319.ece>

Future bleak for Matti Gulla as it faces genetic contamination

http://www.dnaindia.com/bangalore/report_future-bleak-for-matti-gulla-as-it-faces-genetic-contamination_1626064

These Bills need A relook

http://tehelka.com/story_main51.asp?filename=Ne171211BILLS.asp

Are You Using GMOs?' Turkish Consumers Ask Top Milk, Dairy, and Chicken Producers

http://www.treehugger.com/green-food/are-you-using-gmos-turkish-consumers-ask-top-milk-dairy-and-chicken-producers.html?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+treehugger%28Treehugger%29

SAGE CHRONICLE

SAGE – TAMILNADU

Planning meeting with NGOs to initiate organic cotton programme:

As a follow up to the visit to Assisi Garments at Tiruppur, a planning meeting was organized on 15 December 2011 with NGOs who are working in the cotton belt of Tamil Nadu, such as SIMCODESS – Dindigul, Voice Trust - Siruganur, CAD – Perambalur, Indo Trust – Perambalur, Ahimsa – Vaiyampatti and Kudumbam. There was a general feeling among the NGOs that Bt cotton was making heavy inroads in their areas, and that farmers, swayed by its push were hard put to practice organic cotton cultivation. However, the NGOs agreed to convince their farmers to start with a minimum of 100 acres with organic methods under irrigated condition. Organic cotton cultivation over 1000 acres has been planned in 10 NGO locations.

Kudumbam developed the concept note for initiating organic cotton programme and mobilized support from other donors. The note envisaged plans to train farmers on organic cotton cultivation, certification and marketing support, documentation and input support and institutionalization of farmers' groups. A follow up meeting will be organized by the end of January to discuss the concept note and finalize the budget. Due to other important engagements, members like Women's Collectives, Vanagam, Create and PSSS (Perambalur Social Service Society) expressed their inability to participate in the meeting. The outcome of the meeting and the process initiated after it were shared with them.

Flier on BRAI:

Campaigns and protests were organized in opposing the BRAI at different locations of the member organization during the formal and informal village level meetings. Letters were sent to the PM, Agriculture Minister and CM from farmers association. Around 1000 copies of flier on BRAI was translated into Tamil, printed and circulated among SAGE members and other networks like LEISA. Copies were also sent to the legal fraternity, MLAs and MPs of Tamil Nadu.

World Food Day:

In an effort to raise awareness on the importance of safe and nutritious foods among general public, Kudumbam organized a World Food Day. This one-day meeting was organized on 19.12.2011 at Government Middle School, Kurichi of Nagappattinam district in which around 60 participants including school children, teachers, farmers, representatives of farmers federations and parent teacher associations and panchayat leaders of Kurichi panchayat took part. The objective of the meeting was to provide guidance to the general public on the issues of healthy living, and to create awareness on prevention of lifestyle related diseases and to take prevention steps by eating safe and nutritious local foods. The participants were oriented with the emerging issues of non-communicable diseases such as Cancer, Diabetes, Obesity, Cardio-vascular diseases and its relation to the life style changes, food and diet choices. They were further oriented with the dangers of pesticide poisoning and GM foods through pictorial presentations. As alternatives, the resource persons gave emphasis for the conservation and cultivation of traditional varieties in cereals, nutri-millets and vegetables by explaining the nutritional values in comparison with rice and wheat. Prizes were also distributed to the children who won the essay and drawing competition.

Zonal Level Protest:

Women's Collective organized a zonal level protest on GM Food at Ambedkar Thidal, Tiruchuzhi on 29 December 2011 in which 52 participants, including representatives of farmers, women group and activists took part. The participants were explained how genetic modifications are done in the laboratory, how patent issues are handled for GM crops and the problems of farmers on their right to save, store, use and exchange and the risks involved in human and livestock health and genetic pollution to the environment. The participants were also oriented with the emerging bill BRAI and its implications and how it supports the multinationals for profit making. The protest meeting concluded with the following demands.

- Ban Bt Cotton which has proved disastrous to human, cattle and environment.
- Declare the district as GM free.
- Address technical issues related to spurious seeds and decline in yield.
- Ensure the availability of non-Bt cotton seeds and market support for organic cotton.

Vanagam organized 2 protests meeting one at Surumaanpatti on 23 December 2011 and the other at Raasaapatti on 30 December 2001.

School programme:

On 26 December 2011, an awareness programme was organized at Kadavur for school children

Village awareness programme:

Village awareness programme was organized in 2 villages. One at Idaiyappatti on 24th December 2011 and Valaiyappatti 31st December 2011

SAGE ANDHRA PRADESH

On 12 December 2011, Peoples Action for Creative Education (PEACE) organized a one-day consultation in collaboration with Deccan Development Society (DDS) and SAGE Nalgonda at New Shilpa Restaurant, Bhongir. PEACE mobilized the participants from different Civil Societies Organizations working in Nalgonda district.



PEACE invited representatives from NGOs and CSOs from different corners of the district. Similarly PEACE invited Community Based Organizations and Charity organizations like Rotary Club, Inner Wheel Club, Mahila Mandals, Activist organizations like Child Rights Protection Force (CRPF), Teachers Unions, Janavignana Vedikas, Child Welfare Committees, Vasavi Club and Sheep & Goat Rearing Society's presidents and farmers, etc. PEACE Executive Director, Mr. K. Nimmaiah and Salome and Mr. MA. Quayeem from DDS were on the dais along with the Bhuvanagiri President, Sri Purushotham Reddy, and Past President Mr. Shetty Balaiah Yadav. The introductory speech and welcome address was delivered by Nimmaiah, and it was followed by Ms. Salome's technical speech about the introduction of GE Crops in India, how genetically modified crops were introduced and the bad effects of this technology. Dr. M.A. Quayeem explained about the BT Cotton study in Warangal, Adilabad and Nalgonda districts and presented a comparative cost-analysis of BT and Non BT cotton cultivation. He observed that Non Pesticidal Management options were better effective.

After this, the Rotary Club President, Mr. Purushotham Reddy, spoke on the environmental issues related to GE Crops. The Market Committee Chairman, Sri Pothnak Pramod Kumar expressed his support for ecological farming. He promised to conduct special meetings with farmers to be able to practice organic methods or NPM methods of agriculture. Bhongir MDO, Smt. Saraswathi said that she would like to implement the NPM and organic options in her own field. Sri Ravirala Anjaiah, District President from Janavignana Vedika spoke about the bad effects of BT Cotton and GE products.

After the inaugural session there was an open dialogue with the participants. Active, vibrant discussions took place during the entire sessions.

Again during the question time, Salome explained about the background of Monsanto Companies and its alliance with Mahiyco and how our politicians and scientists are becoming corrupt. She said that there was a move to bring a law to gag all dissenting voices, and that people should unite to fight this measure.



On 20 December 2011, SVDS and SABALA organized a round table on "law and genetically modified food and farming" at Dr. BR AMBEDKAR COLLEGE OF LAW, Andhra University, Vishakapatnam city. Prof. PVGD Prasad Reddy, Rector, Andhra University, in his inaugural speech mentioned that scientific inventions with safety are welcome and GMOs are not an exception to this rule. Prof. T. Ramana from Bio-Technology, Andhra University gave an elaborate account of GMO and GE technology.

Prof. Y. Sathyanarayana and Dr. Rajyalakshmi spoke on the role of the legal community in the light of BRAI bill. Dr. Narismha Reddy illustrated many examples as to how GE can do irreversible harms. Mr. Joginaidu, Ms. Saraswati both shared Bt. Cotton farmers' sufferings and struggles in our state. At the end Salome shared about Indian food and farming systems and she emphasized that ecological agriculture along with other natural resources will meet the food and nutrition needs of this country, so there is no need for GE/ GMO in this country. Participants had enough time for discussions and clarifications and Prof. V. Kesava Rao, Principle – Law College anchored the program. The program was well attended by Law college students and staff.



On 23rd December 2011, a meeting was conducted for teachers to give subject input on Genetically Modified Organisms in Mangpeta Mandal. The program was attended by forty five teachers, five Mandal Resource Persons and four State Resource Persons. The audience was addressed by K. Damodar from SEED NGO, B. Vagyanaik, S upervisor - Multi Lingual Education Programme, the local Mandal Education officer and Mr. Narsimhulu, the local Mandal Resource Person. They all touched upon the theme of bt. Brinjal and GE technology. In addition to GE and GMO, they also shared about virtues of traditional food and farming systems, and then it was time for discussions. The participants raised different questions and doubts which were clarified by the resource persons.

SWARDS NGO organized a Civil Society Dialogue on 26 December 2011 at Siddepet town in Medak district, which was well attended by government officials and NGO friends. Many spoke on the occasion and promised to spread the 'NO GMO' message to different sections of the people.



On 28 December 2011 DDS organized a media workshop at Sangareddy for the local media of the Medak district. The theme was Raging Debate on Genetic Engineering: Can Media Democratize This? Between 11 AM – 1 PM at Conference Hall, Zilla Parishad building SangaReddy. Senior Journalists, Sri. Kurmanath from Business line and Mr. Prasad from Andhra Jyothi were invited to be on the panel. Ms. Sudha, Activist and Ms. Salome from SAGE – DDS were also on the panel.



Salome read the welcome address, and a video clipping of P.V.Satheesh was shown in the inaugural session. There was enough time for discussions. The panelists and the participants pledged that they would present stories highlighting the harmful effects of GE while presenting the virtues of the traditional food system and the triumphs of ecological agriculture. The group decided to meet once in two months to get more information on GE.

National News

Of Seeds, Parliament, Prayers and the Gita

PUBLIC REPORTER

Why we need to block MNCs looking to sell our farmers GM seeds

[Rakesh Manchanda](#) | December 22 2011

Activists use a story in the villages they visit to explain safe life to the farmers. It goes like this:

A farmer reached God's shop and asks, "what do you sell, Lord?"

God replies, "Whatever your heart desires."

Farmer: "I want success and happiness."

God smiles and says, "I sell only seeds and not fruits."

In life, the transition from seed to fruit remains a responsibility of humans; there is no role of God. Getting a fruit out of seed requires a collective of the right conditions - the right kind of soil, adequate rainfall, proper sunshine, the proper organic nutrient and a team that shall oversee the other conditions. The enjoyment of the fruit takes appropriate fruit (wealth distribution, justified sharing and team coordination during monitoring the transformation of the seed into plant which in turn bears the fruit. The whole cycle is orchestrated in a 'give and take' manner which is controlled by nature. This nature is what most of us call God. The farmers (the collective) monitor the transformation.

But today, while some of the conditions of this process are being met, one crucial step has been circumvented. Almost everybody other than the farmer, benefit from the fruits of his labour.

Let us see what happens when we, given the context of the present, tamper with this cycle of nature. If we bypass nature and plant genetically modified (GM) seeds, we may probably have to recategorise fruits as pharma products. This would mean more

jobs in industries and laboratories. But for the farmer? For 2.5 lakh cotton growers in Maharashtra, the use of Bt Cotton meant mounting debts and eventual suicide. The lies of the American agro company Monsanto about the low costs of GM seeds is exposed by the fact that American farmers have resisted the seed company's profit-steered motive to get them to adopt GM seeds. Sadly, in our case, our nagar sevaks, MLAs and elected representatives have let companies like Monsanto in as these multinational companies nourish feed vested interests. There is no public debate on how Monsanto's GM seeds will end hunger in the country, yet our leaders have somehow been privy to 'scientific' evidence that these are the panacea. The 'convinced' are now trying to convert us. Only a handful of MPs from the Left and Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar seem sincere about walling our farmers against the GM seeds. They are the resistance even as our government readies the red carpet for GM crops. It, in fact, is on the verge of approving the single-stop clearance window for MNCs seeding GM seeds - through the Biological Regulatory Authority of India (Brai) Bill, 2011.

When I talk of corruption being responsible for hunger, I am, of course, not talking of the subsidies for food in parliament canteen being imagined in the light of rotting grains in government warehouse as millions go hungry in this question. We could talk of it but we know that the MPs vote on increasing their own wages; so, 'perks' like subsidised food are a petty concern. Let us, on the other hand talk of political will. How is that national interest constitutes fighting against a ban on a version of the Gita brought out by the Gita while letting a foreign MNC like Monsanto is allowed to conduct multi-location trials on Karnataka's traditional brinjal variety - Udupi Gulla? Lalu Prasad and Sushma Swaraj vociferously took up the cause of the Hare Krishna brigade promoted by an international body but looked away when Monsanto was tampering with Udupi Gulla which is often offered to Lord Krishna in various pujas because of its unique taste and flavour? We may not want the Gita banned anywhere in the world but do we need American GM seeds in our fields?

In August, few Greenpeace activists were arrested outside Parliament when they tried to display a banner reading: “Do Not Corrupt My Food”. On September 6, a peoples’ event initiated by Alliance For Safe Food, Greenpeace and Limca Book of World Records was initiated in Delhi Haat. Millions of brinjal lovers were collectively invited to record a famous Brinjal Bharta eating event. Brinjal in form of chatpatta Baigan Bharta was cooked. Twenty chefs from Delhi’s Le Meriden Hotel worked together to prepare it. A letter to prime minister signed by over one lakh citizens was sent with the request to withdraw this dangerous anti-life Brai Bill. A portion of this organic bharta was sent to prime minister also. Why? Because soon the parliamentarians under leadership of PM are going to pass a bill that shall promote GM brinjal instead of organic brinjal. Then, there will be no organic bharta available for tasting.

An invitation to alert citizens to rescue truth needs roadshows across villages and cities. A street-play titled ‘Do not corrupt my food’ has been staged in Uttarakhand and Delhi. Brai is a bill that has been planted for all the wrong reasons. It safeguards the profits of the top one percent of MNCs while 99 percent of the poor and voiceless go hungry. In the process, the bill would have turned the Indian agricultural sector into a slave of the American MNCs. The other dangerous bill in the government’s arsenal is the ‘Food security Bill’. Without the right provisions, the bill will do nothing to end the situation as it is today, with rats partying at warehouses as grains rot while artificial shortages let black marketers party as well.

Prayers and seeds are similar - both have seemingly nothing. Yet, they also have the potential to create everything from life to prosperity. No seed can survive without oxygen just as prayer will fade without hope. Prayers make a person feel less lonely and more motivated for results. Seeds have the power to dispel barrenness and fuel a hope for a rich harvest. Both reap - one desires, the other a crop. Where prayers and seeds differ is while prayers may benefit the one who is submitting, seeds produce flowers and fruits - feeding everything bees, birds to humans.

However, just as prayers are losing their appeal today as the world opts for coercion, so have our traditional seeds been discarded for the new GM seeds which supposedly give the farmer a better and faster yield. The buck must stop with our politicians who need new ways of defining themselves and set themselves on a course correction. When people trust blindly in you, you can never show them that they are blind. So, it needs dedication, awakening and leap of faith for our politicians to wake up to the hazard of GM crops.

The wasting away of safe food needs to be stemmed by correct seed-fruit economics.

Silence and corruption will only feed a gluttonous market that has no eyes and no ears. It will fail to bring any real change for our country.

<http://governancenow.com/news/public-reporter/seeds-parliament-prayers-and-gita>

Another Bt-cotton variant falls to fraud charges

Zia Haq, Hindustan Times

New Delhi, December 30, 2011

What could be a significant fraud in India’s publicly funded biotech research, a second Bt cotton variant – NHH 44 — claimed by government scientists as indigenous technology has been found to be sourced from US firm Monsanto’s original patented product, sources have confirmed to Hindustan Times.

While Bikaneri, a Bt cotton technology developed by University of Agricultural Sciences (UAS), Dharwad, has already been traced to Monsanto’s genes, NHH 44 is a hybrid variant, but both essentially are based on a “proprietary technology” created by Monsanto.

The first fraud came to light on the basis of disclosures made under the Right to Information (RTI) Act.

Together, “Bikaneri” and “NHH 44” were the only genetically-modified varieties of the Bt cotton developed through government-funded research to provide cheaper alternatives to poor farmers, while numerous other privately-developed varieties crowd India’s royalty-driven Rs 2,000-crore cotton seed market.

Much of the flak is being heaped on UAS scientist BM Khadi, one of the lead scientists involved in the research. He headed the Central Institute for Cotton Research, Nagpur, until May 2008 and it was during his tenure that NHH 44 was initiated. He is also part of India’s biotech regulator, pointing to a potential conflict of interest. Khadi could not be reached for comments.

However, what were deemed to be original products, involving heavy government investment, have turned out to be not entirely indigenous. Relying on Monsanto’s technology could have been possible because its intellectual property rights protection of 15 years had ended, freeing violators from legal tangles, sources said.

The Indian Council of Agricultural Research’s “network programme on transgenics” had a budgetary provision of R100 crore in the XI Plan.

The revelations have led critics opposed to GM crops to question government funding for technologies that are suspect. “This puts a question

mark on whether capabilities to produce ‘indigenous’ GM crops exist, not that we want these,” Kavitha Kuruganti, who represents the Alliance for Sustainable & Holistic Agriculture, said

<http://www.hindustantimes.com/News-Feed/newdelhi/Another-Bt-cotton-variant-falls-to-fraud-charges/Article1-788888.aspx>

COTTON SAGA UNRAVELS

■ What is the scam?

Two Bt cotton variants developed by govt scientists found based on Monsanto’s genes

■ Why were these varieties of Bt cotton made?

Since they were publicly funded, they were to be cheap for farmers. But price alone isn’t the decisive factor. They had to be ideally based on original “events”, which relates to locating the right gene

■ Is this a violation of patent?

Intellectual property rights (IPR) may not apply, as the protection shelf life of Monsanto’s technology is deemed over. So, it is easier for third parties to work on it

GLOBAL

Genetically Engineered Safety Act: The New Food Safety Bill?

Initiatives like the [Non-GMO Project](#) have been working to [educate consumers](#) about the [risks that come with genetically-modified crops](#), which are now in at least 70 percent of the processed foods in this country. [There are risks to human health](#) and there’s the [contamination of neighboring farms](#), and some have [taken to the courts](#)—which are [starting to listen](#).

Now, Ohio Rep. Dennis Kucinich has announced [legislation](#) that would prohibit the open-air cultivation of genetically-modified organisms (GMOs) in pharmaceutical and industrial crops. The Genetically Engineered Safety Act is intended to prevent, according to a [press release](#) from Kucinich’s office, biological contamination of our food supply. It would “also establish a tracking system to regulate the growing, handling, transportation, and disposal of pharmaceutical and industrial crops.”

More from the Kucinich statement:

The Department of Agriculture has allowed more than 300 outdoor field trials of plants—including feed crops including corn, soybeans, rice, safflower, barley, alfalfa, mustard greens, peas, sugarcane, tomatoes, and wheat—which are genetically engineered to produce experimental pharmaceuticals, industrial enzymes and novel proteins. Those GE substances are not intended to be incorporated into food or to be spread into the environment or our food supply. Yet there are examples of such contamination, with enormously destructive consequences.

Without addressing open-air cultivation, there's nothing stopping GMO crops from spreading further and there's little way to know just how far they are advancing. Kucinich said, "Experimental pharmaceutical drugs are being grown in this country in the open, allowing them to contaminate conventional crops without detection. We cannot rely on industry to prevent the unintended spread of genetically engineered organisms."

<http://www.treehugger.com/green-food/genetically-engineered-safety-act-new-food-safety-bill.html>

GE Food

Food Chain of Fools

Friday, December 16, 2011 by Owen E. Dell, Santa Barbara

I just spent an hour watching an [interview with Dr. Don Huber](#). I hadn't planned on spending my morning that way. I hadn't planned on sitting in shock for an hour with tears welling up in my eyes. I have long known of some of the risks posed by the deadly combination of GMO crops (genetically modified organisms) and glyphosate (Roundup). But the facts presented here go so far beyond whatever any of us might be aware of, that I am simply stunned. Dr. Huber is one of the most cogent and rational people I have ever heard speak, and his credentials as a mainstream scientist and university professor are impeccable. This is not only worth watching, I believe it is essential to watch and to act upon.

Briefly, Dr. Huber details study after study showing that the accumulation of glyphosate in crops propagates up the food chain, causing numerous diseases and massive infertility in animals, including humans. Additionally, formerly benign diseases are now running rampant and are also directly traceable to glyphosate and GMOs. And there is

even a pathogen entirely new to science showing up in these crops; it is so new that scientists don't even know how to categorize it because it is unique and cannot be assigned to a class of organisms. Researchers working on this have been fired or have had their funding taken away, and in fact such research is now illegal. This is not some alarmist conspiracy theory; it is based on verifiable facts presented by a credible professional with a profound knowledge of his subject.

The bottom line is that it is not overstating the risk to say that this may be the thing that finally kills us off, along with much of the rest of life on this planet. I'm sorry if that spoils your day, but we all need to get our heads out of our asses and face the facts of what is being done to us, thanks in no small part to our own indifference. Of course I signed the on-line petition to Secretary Vilsack, but since he is in the club of true believers in GMOs, precious little will come of our protests. What to do? I have no idea, other than to begin with spreading awareness of this problem.

Heaven help us all. We don't seem to be able to help ourselves.

<http://www.independent.com/news/2011/dec/16/food-chain-fools/>

Traditional farming can save threatened species, study finds

Features associated with arable farming, such as hedgerows, are essential to keep several bird species alive

As we eliminate these habitats, these species are threatened with extinction, said Hugh Wright, a researcher in the School of Environmental Sciences at the University of East Anglia, United Kingdom, and lead author of the study, published in Conservation Letters earlier this month.

“There really is no hope for these species if industrial farming continues unchecked,” he told SciDev.Net.

Although reintroducing or mimicking traditional farming techniques has had success in conserving [wildlife](#) in Europe, “conservation in the developing world has always focused on pristine forest ecosystems and has paid little attention to where farming might be beneficial,” Wright said.

The study found 29 bird species threatened by the decline of traditional agriculture in developing countries. This number could be much higher if all organisms, rather than just birds, are considered, as evidence from Europe suggests that traditional farming also benefits reptiles, amphibians, butterflies and even plants, Wright said.

Farmers can benefit too from protecting [biodiversity](#) since it helps to justify traditional agriculture and could prevent big agri-businesses from forcing farmers off their land, he added. Also,

by offering farmers economic incentives to continue these beneficial practices, governments can ensure that conservation and development move forward together.

Tim Benton, professor of population ecology at the University of Leeds, United Kingdom, agreed that traditional agricultural methods are a valuable conservation tool, but said that adopting techniques aimed at saving a few iconic species can disadvantage farmers.

“Applying low-intensity farming instead of industrial methods often pits livelihoods against conservation, and can impose limits on a region’s development,” he said.

Instead, he said that “land sparing” — where some areas are intensively farmed while others are left primarily for conservation — can lead to more wildlife and better crop yields.

There is no one strategy, but a “middle ground” that combines land sparing and traditional farming methods to suit local conditions could be the best conservation strategy, he added.

Wright agreed that a mixed approach can maximise biodiversity. “You need to assess which species you have, how feasible it is to protect them, what it will cost and social issues as well before coming up with a conservation strategy for an area,” he said.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2011/dec/23/farming-food>

GE & Agriculture

Title: Under Industry Pressure, USDA Works to Speed Approval of Monsanto's Genetically Engineered Crops

Date: 15 December 2011

Contents: **THIRD WORLD NETWORK BIOSAFETY INFORMATION SERVICE**

Under Industry Pressure, USDA Works to Speed Approval of Monsanto's Genetically Engineered Crops

For years, biotech agriculture opponents have accused regulators of working too closely with big biotech firms when deregulating genetically engineered (GE) crops. Now, their worst fears could be coming true: under a new two-year pilot program at the USDA, regulators are training the world's biggest biotech firms, including Monsanto, BASF and Syngenta, to conduct environmental reviews of their own transgenic seed products as part of the government's deregulation process.

This would eliminate a critical level of oversight for the production of GE crops. Regulators are also testing new cost-sharing agreements that allow biotech firms to help pay private contractors to prepare mandatory environmental statements on GE plants the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) is considering deregulating.

The USDA launched the pilot project in April and, in November, the USDA announced vague plans to "streamline" the deregulation petition process for GE organisms. A USDA spokesperson said the streamlining effort is not part of the pilot project, but both efforts appear to address a backlog of pending GE crop deregulation petitions that has angered big biotech firms seeking to rollout new products.

Documents obtained by Truthout under a Freedom Of Information Act (FOIA) request reveal that

biotech companies, lawmakers and industry groups have put mounting pressure on the USDA in recent years to speed up the petition process, limit environmental impact assessments and approve more GE crops.

One group went as far as sending USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack a timeline of GE soybean development that reads like a deregulation wish list. [Click here and here to download and read some of the documents released to Truthout.]

The pilot program is named the NEPA Pilot Project, after the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), which mandates that agencies prepare statements on the potential environmental impacts of proposed actions by the federal government, such as deregulating transgenic plants. On July 14, USDA officials held a training workshop to help representatives from biotech firms (see a full list here) to understand the NEPA process and prepare Environmental Reports on biotech products they have petitioned the USDA to deregulate.

Regulators can now independently review the Environmental Reports and can use them to prepare their own legally mandated reviews, instead of simply reviewing the company's petitions for deregulation. The pilot project aims to speed up the deregulation process by allowing petitioning companies to do some of the legwork and help pay contractors to prepare regulatory documents and, for its part, the USDA has kept the pilot fairly transparent. A list of 22 biotech seeds that could be reviewed under the pilot program includes Monsanto drought-tolerant corn, a "non-browning" apple, freeze tolerant eucalyptus trees and several crops engineered to tolerate the controversial herbicides glyphosate and 2,4 D.

Activists say biotech firms like Monsanto are concerned only with profit and routinely supply regulators with one-sided information on the risks their GE seeds - and the pesticides sprayed on and produced by them - pose to consumers,

animals and the agricultural environment. (The Natural Society recently declared Monsanto the worst company of 2011.) Bill Freese, a policy expert with the Center for Food Safety (CFS), told Truthout that the NEPA pilot gives already powerful biotech companies too much influence over the review process.

“It’s the equivalent of letting BP do their own Environmental Assessment of a new rig,” Freese said.

Monsanto Goes to Court

Freese and the Center for Food Safety have been on the frontlines of the battle to reform the USDA’s regulatory approval process for GE crops. The group was a plaintiff in recent lawsuits challenging the deregulation - which basically means approval for planting without oversight - of Monsanto’s patented alfalfa and sugar beets that are genetically engineered to tolerate glyphosate-based Roundup herbicide. Farmers can spray entire fields of Monsanto’s “Roundup Ready” crops with Roundup to kill unwanted weeds while sparing the GE crops, but in recent years, some weeds have developed a tolerance to glyphosate, Roundup’s active ingredient. The cases kept the crops out of America’s fields for years and prompted biotech companies to put heavy pressure on top USDA officials to streamline and speed up the deregulation process, practically setting the stage for the NEPA pilot underway today.

Under NEPA, agencies like the USDA must prepare an Environmental Assessment (EA) to determine if the proposed action, such as deregulating a transgenic organism, would have an impact on the environment. If some type of significant impact is likely, the agency must then prepare a more in-depth Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) to explore potential impacts and alternative actions. NEPA requires an EIS for actions “significantly affecting the quality of the human environment.” Preparing a full impact statement for a biotech plant implies the government does not think GE crops are safe and the biotech industry has routinely butted heads with

environmentalists while attempting to convince regulators and consumers otherwise. In the Monsanto beets and alfalfa cases, the CFS and other plaintiffs argued that the USDA should have prepared an EIS, not just a simple EA, before deregulating both Monsanto crops.

In the alfalfa case, the CFS and its co-plaintiffs claimed the crop could have significant impacts by crossbreeding and contaminating conventional and organic alfalfa with transgenes. They also argued the crop would increase the use of herbicides and promote the spread of herbicide-tolerant weeds known as “super weeds.” A federal district court agreed and vacated the USDA’s original approval, halting plantings across the country. Monsanto challenged the decision and the alfalfa case landed in the Supreme Court in 2010. The high court overturned an injunction preventing farmers from planting the alfalfa, but also ordered the USDA to prepare an EIS and issue another deregulation decision. The sugar beet case ended in similar fashion and the USDA recently released a draft EIS on the crop, which is expected to be deregulated in early 2012.

Monsanto won the right to sell its GE alfalfa seed in February 2011, but the lengthy and expensive legal battle captured the attention of food lovers and agriculturalists across the country. Americans debated the potential dangers of GE crops and the merits of the regulatory system that is supposed to protect farmers and consumers. As documents unearthed by a Truthout FOIA request reveal, the biotech industry did not sit idly by as activists challenged the regulatory status quo.

Mounting Pressure

The Biotechnology Industry Organization (BIO) is a powerful group that represents dozens of biotech companies such as Monsanto, BASF and Bayer, and has spent more than \$67 million lobbying Congress since 2000. In April 2010, BIO sent a letter to USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack as the Monsanto alfalfa case made its way through the courts. BIO warned Vilsack that the American biotech agriculture industry could be crippled if the legal precedents required the USDA to prepare an EIS for every GE crop up for deregulation:

With 19 deregulation petitions pending with more on the way, requiring an EIS for each product would amount to

a de facto moratorium on commercialization and would send an unprecedented message that USDA believes that these products do have an environmental impact, when in fact most do not. Any suggestion by USDA that biotechnology plants as a category are likely to cause significant adverse effects on the quality of the human environment (i.e., require an EIS) would make approvals by other trading partners virtually impossible ...

BIO claimed that such a policy would be an “over-reaction to the current judicial decisions” and would threaten America’s economic dominance in the agricultural biotechnology market. Such a policy, BIO representatives stated, would send a message to European countries that American regulators believe GE crops impact the environment, making approvals of GE crops by the European Union “virtually impossible” and allowing “Brazil and China to surpass the United States as world leaders in biotechnology.”

BIO also claimed that more rigorous assessments would “undercut” positions consistently take by the Obama and Bush administrations on the safety of biotech agriculture.

Vilsack received similar letters requesting the USDA continue relying on EAs instead of EISs to deregulate GE crops from the Americas Soybean Association and the American Seed Trade Association. Both groups worried that an increase in oversight - precipitated by the more in-depth impact evaluation - could back up approvals for years. The soybean association included in its letter a pipeline chart of 25 GE soybean varieties it “expected” to be approved for commercialization within a decade.

A policy requiring an EIS for every GE seed is exactly what critics of Monsanto and the rest of the industry have spent years fighting for.

Unlike the industry, they believe the herbicides that blanket GE crops and the potential for transgenic contamination are potential threats to the agricultural environment and human health.

Vilsack wrote a steady-handed reply to each trade group, reassuring them that the NEPA policy would not change and the USDA would continue preparing an EA for new GE seeds and an EIS only when necessary. Vilsack also wrote that he was “pleased” to recently meet with biotech industry representatives and “discuss improving the efficiency of the biotechnology regulatory process.” Such improvements, he wrote, are “directly related”

to the USDA’s “objective of ensuring the United State leads the world in sustainable crop production and biotech crop exports.” He took the opportunity to announce that the USDA would reorganize the Biotechnology Regulatory Services agency and create a new NEPA team “dedicated to creating high quality and defensible documents to better inform our regulatory decisions.” This new NEPA team would go on to develop the NEPA Pilot Project and begin streamlining the approval process.

To Freese, it appears that Vilsack used to the word “defensible” in reference to legal challenges like the ones his group made to Monsanto alfalfa and sugar beets. “Their whole focus is on ‘defensible’

Environmental Assessments,” Freese said after reading the letters. “From our perspective, that’s the wrong goal ... it presumes the crop is going to be approved.”

Freese said the correspondence between Vilsack and the industry groups highlights the need for a culture change at the USDA. Regulators should be concerned about the safety of new GE products, not ensuring American exports compete with Brazil and China.

“It should be all about doing good assessments and making sure the crops that are approved are safe,” Freese said.

A USDA spokesperson declined to comment when asked if the agency would like to respond to criticisms of the NEPA Pilot Project and said updates on the project will be made available online.

Watchdogs like Freese know that regulators already work closely with the industry and the NEPA Pilot Project could simply make their work more efficient. Regulators already rely heavily on data provided by private contractors and by biotech companies to prepare EAs. During the Monsanto alfalfa case, internal emails between regulators and Monsanto officials surfaced and revealed the company worked closely with regulators to edit its original petition to deregulate the alfalfa. One regulator even accepted Monsanto's help in conducting the USDA's original EA of the GE alfalfa before it was initially approved in 2005.

Genetically engineered and modified crops continue to cause controversy across the globe, but in America they are a fact of life. The Obama and Bush administrations have actively promoted biotech agriculture both at home and abroad. Countries like China, Argentina and Brazil have also embraced biotech agriculture. Regulators in European countries - including crucial trade partners like France and Spain - have been much more cautious and, in some cases, even hostile toward the industry. GE crops are banned in

Hungary and Peru, and earlier this year officials in Hungary destroyed 1,000 acres of corn containing Monsanto transgenes. The US, however, continues to allow big biotech companies to cultivate considerable power and influence and, as the letters uncovered by FOIA reveal, top regulators are ready to meet their demands.

"The USDA regards its own regulatory system as a rubber stamp," Freese said after reading the letters. "At least at the upper levels, there's always been this presumption that [GE crops] must be approved."

Third World Network

131 Jalan Macalister,
10400 Penang,
Malaysia

Email: twnet@po.jaring.my

Website: www.biosafety-info.net and

www.twinside.org.sg To subscribe to other TWN information lists: www.twnnews.net

This monthly bulletin is brought out by Southern Action on Genetic Engineering (SAGE), a coalition of civil society activists, farmers, scientists, academicians, and consumer groups of four Southern States of India, viz., Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Orissa. SAGE has been waging a concerted battle against genetic engineering through a series of activities that involve public protests, media actions, seminars, consultations and publication of a series of educational materials.