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U.S. Rice Supply Contaminated

Genetically Altered Variety Is Found in Long-Grain Rice

By Rick Weiss
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Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns announced late yesterday that U.S. commercial supplies of long-grain rice had become inadvertently contaminated with a genetically engineered variety not approved for human consumption.

Johanns said the company that made the experimental rice, Bayer CropScience of Monheim, Germany, had provided information to the Agriculture Department and the Food and Drug Administration indicating that the rice poses no threats to human health or the environment.

"Based upon the information we have seen, this product is safe," he said in a telephone news conference.

Johanns said he did not know where the contaminated rice was found or how widespread it may be in the U.S. food supply. The agency first learned about it from the company, he said, after it discovered "trace amounts" during testing of commercial supplies.

The variety, known as LLRICE 601, is endowed with bacterial DNA that makes rice plants resistant to a weedkiller made by the agricultural giant Aventis.

Johanns said Bayer had not finished the process of getting LLRICE 601 approved for marketing before dropping the project years ago. But the company did complete the process for two other varieties of rice with the same gene. And although neither of those were marketed, he said, their approval offers reassurance that 601 is probably safe, too.

Bayer said in a statement it is "cooperating closely" with the government on the discovery. It added that the protein conferring herbicide tolerance "is well known to regulators and has been confirmed safe for food and feed use in a number of crops by regulators in many countries, including the EU, Japan, Mexico, U.S. and Canada."

Johanns acknowledged that the discovery could have a significant impact on rice sales -- especially exports, which are worth close to \$1 billion a year. Many U.S. trading partners have strict policies forbidding importation of certain genetically engineered foods, even if they are approved in the United States.

Those restrictions reflect a mix of science-based fears that some gene-altered foods or seeds may pose health or environmental hazards; cultural beliefs about food purity; and political wrangling over trade disparities.

If other countries cut off imports, the political and economic impact could rival or exceed that of the last

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such major event -- the discovery in 2000 that the U.S. corn supply had become contaminated with StarLink corn. StarLink, which was engineered to be insect-resistant, was approved for use in animal feed but not for humans because of its potential to trigger allergic reactions.

The StarLink episode led to the recall of hundreds of products and the destruction of corn crops on hundreds of thousands of acres. There have been several smaller incidents requiring similar actions since.

Yesterday's announcement quickly prompted a new round of accusations that the government is failing in its efforts to regulate and contain the burgeoning field of agricultural biotechnology, in which genes from various organisms are added to crops and other plants -- usually to confer resistance to weedkillers or to make the plants produce their own insecticides.

"How many incidents will it take before the government takes their oversight of the biotech industry seriously?" asked Gregory Jaffe, director of the biotechnology project at the District-based Center for Science in the Public Interest. "It's reassuring that in this instance there is no safety risk, but I don't think that justifies the industry's blatant violation of government regulations."

Johanns said Bayer contacted the USDA about the problem on July 31, but the agency delayed announcing the finding until it had developed a test it could share with trading partners and others who might want to check for contamination. That test is now available.

Although Bayer stopped field tests of LLRICE 601 in 2001, the contamination appeared in the 2005 harvest, Johanns said -- a detail that Margaret Mellon, director of the food and environment program at the Union of Concerned Scientists in Washington, found "alarming."

"It's more evidence to me that all of these things that have been getting tested ultimately have a route to the food supply," Mellon said.

Although agency investigations are underway, both Johanns and Robert Brackett of the FDA's Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition said they do not anticipate recalls, crop destruction or other regulatory action.

"If we become aware of any new information to suggest that food or feed is unsafe, we will take action," Johanns said.

Instead, Johanns said, Bayer now plans to resurrect its effort to get the product approved -- or in government parlance, "deregulated" -- a move that would make the contamination issue moot in the domestic market.

Researcher Madonna Lebling contributed to this report.

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