

GE Rice Contaminates U.S. Rice Supply

When trace amounts of Liberty Link 601 rice (LL601) were found in the U.S. long-grain rice supply in August, no one imagined that it would still be in the news months later, or that it would elicit a wide-reaching crisis for U.S. rice farmers.

Now, three months later, Europe is testing all U.S. rice imports for traces of LL601 and sending any contaminated shipments back; Japan has banned U.S. long-grain rice imports; European groceries are pulling U.S. rice from their shelves; and Bayer CropScience, the company that produced LL601, is facing numerous lawsuits by farmers for damages.

How could a simple variety of rice cause so much consternation? LL601 is a type of genetically engineered rice that Bayer had been field-testing from 1998–2001. It contains a bacterial gene that protects the rice from Bayer's Liberty weed-killer, thus allowing farmers to spray the chemical without harming their crops.

For unknown reasons, Bayer discontinued the rice in 2001, but apparently not before it had escaped control and somehow managed to contaminate the U.S. rice supply. It was never approved for market. Allegations have been made that Bayer, and possibly the U.S. Department of Agriculture, were aware of the contamination months earlier, but delayed informing the public until August.

After the contamination was made public, and as it was only beginning to come to light how widespread it had become, Bayer filed for retroactive USDA approval for its LL601 rice. Using a shortcut in the approval process, Bayer claims that LL601 is 'substantially similar' to previously approved rice, and should thus

be approved without extensive testing or studies.

Almost 40 percent of the ostensibly public application for deregulation has been blacked out as “confidential business information.” (Read the response of the Center for Food Safety to Bayer’s application for deregulation of LL601: www.centerforfoodsafety.org/PR9_14_06.cfm).

For all the concerns spawned by the escape of LL601 into the U.S. rice supply chain, including the possibility of cross-breeding with wild, weedy red rice (the predominant plant pest of rice farmers), potential allergenicity, and the collapse of the U.S. rice export market, one of the most concerning is the precedent set by its post-contamination approval. Although it not official yet, the USDA has signaled that approval is likely forthcoming.

According to the Center for Food Safety, “USDA’s stamp of approval to genetically engineered rice after it has illegally contaminated the food supply would set a dangerous precedent, rewarding the biotech industry’s negligence and thereby making similar contamination episodes more likely in the future.”

According to The Washington Post, since the news of the contamination scandal broke in August, Bayer has filed nine new petitions to being field trials of new GM crops. So far, eight of those have already been approved.

Perhaps seeking to address some of the issues highlighted by the LL601 rice scandal, Ohio Representative Dennis Kucinich introduced legislation in the House to label and regulate the marketing of genetically engineered foods earlier this year. One bill, HR 5269, The Genetically Engineered Food Right to Know Act of 2006, would

follow in the footsteps of existing regulation in the European Union, Japan, Russia, and Australia, as well as other countries, by requiring mandatory labeling of all food containing genetically engineered ingredients.

HR 5269 currently has 17 co-sponsors in the House. Another bill, HR 5268, The Genetically Engineered Food Safety Act, would require mandatory, pre-market safety testing of GE foods. For more information on the bills, please visit ga3.org/campaign/Label_GE_Food.