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Can GM and Organic Get Along?

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The U.S. Department of Agriculture is hoping organic and genetically modified crops can 'co-exist.' H

By Lisa Hare

Despite fierce opposition from businesses, organizations and consumers supporting organic agriculture, the U.S. Department of Agriculture has determined it will approve the full deregulation or modified deregulation of genetically engineered (GE) alfalfa. The agency will announce its decision on, or shortly after, January 24.

The [USDA is pushing for "coexistence"](#) between organic and genetically engineered farmers. Organic advocates wonder such a "middle ground" is possible. This negotiation is taking place in the conflict over GE alfalfa.

Things are heating up. Today (Jan. 20), the House Agriculture Committee will hold a public "forum" on the issue. And two days ago, senators Saxby Chambliss, R-GA, and Pat Roberts., R-KS, and U.S. Representative Frank Lucas, R-OK, sent USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack a letter asking him to deregulate GE alfalfa without restrictions.

On December 17, the USDA released its environmental impact statement (EIS) of Monsanto's genetically engineered (GE) Roundup Ready alfalfa. USDA produced the EIS in response to a federal judge, who asked for a more thorough analysis of the potential environmental, economic and health impacts of GE alfalfa before the USDA approved deregulation.

Although the EIS outlines three options for GE alfalfa (continued regulation, full deregulation or conditional deregulation), the USDA has made it clear it will deregulate this crop by the end of January 2011, pushing the two side into "co-existence."

The USDA's decision was bad news for organic farmer [Bob Quinn](#) of north-central Montana.

Though Quinn's main cash crop is organic wheat, like many others in the organic industry he believes that deregulating GE alfalfa to any extent establishes a precedence that will have long-term consequences for all organic farmers, the lar the USDA organic label program and consumers seeking to avoid genetically engineered products.



Khorasan wheat.

Quinn has spent decades resurrecting, protect

The exact origin of this "unadulterated" variety from Egypt in the 1940s. Marketed as Kamut, value and digestibility than its genetically mod

Quinn's concern is that the USDA's deregulation principles of the organic industry and its prod [Quinn here.](#))

Quinn said all of the discussions regarding potential contamination are really part of a much larger

"It's very frustrating," he said. "We're now being an industry that claims full ownership without ac

The USDA has asked the organic industry to work on a program that would allow the “co-existence” of GE alfalfa with within the EIS that would regulate how this co-existence between GE and organics would take place.

Quinn said the biotech industry has a responsibility to be able to control what it produces, and, at a minimum, four po

Following Europe’s example, the first step, Quinn said, is labeling.

“The consumers have a right to know what they’re buying and eating, and it has to start by labeling foods that contain products.”

Second, Quinn said that in order to eliminate the risk of cross-pollination or contamination of non-GM crops, the GM

“Their gene jockeys can do just about anything — at least that’s what they sell themselves on. They have the capability a sterile pollen,” he said.

Next, Quinn said that all GM seeds should be required to be marked.

“We need an inexpensive, yet reliable way to distinguish GM seed from non-GM seed at any point in the handling syst something similar, so as to prevent accidental contamination during handling.”

And lastly, Quinn pointed out the absolute need for the biotech industry to be held accountable for the products they r

“These companies must be liable for what they’re doing so we don’t have farmers suing farmers when neither is technically at fault,” Quinn said. “If we look back over the past several years, we could easily say that billions of dollars have been lost due to GM contamination, and that’s just on the basis of market pricing. We haven’t even begun to discuss how the environmental damages equate to dollars and cents.”

Quinn speculated that if Monsanto were to start getting billed for the clean-up expenses incurred from damaging run-off from the chemicals required to grow GM crops, things might start to change.

“As far as I know, we haven’t tried to put a price tag on the dead zones in the Gulf, and I don’t know if that’s even possible,” the farmer said, “but at the very least there needs to be some accountability.”

Lisa Hare is a Nebraska writer.



Quinn's :
organic :
the USD

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Comments

Double standards?

Wait, so this plant of mysterious origin is ok? Heh. If anyone in a biotech company tried that they'd be run out of

But alright--can you provide the links to the testing that showed safety and non-allergenicity? And that nutritional

And since it's presumably different from other wheat, is this farmer concerned that his pollen might contaminate :

Get it right!

"Kamut, this whole grain has tested to be far superior in nutritional value and digestibility than its genetically mod
There are no GM traits approved.

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needs to be some accountability.”

GM corn has allowed farmers the ability to use no-till practices and thus dramatically reducing runoff. There are some accountability to tell the truth? Mr. Quinn uses the standard organic line - avoid the truth and scare people for organic products.

Comment from Wyoming

We received a note from Phillip Hartman, a Wyoming farmer, about this issue. He forwarded a letter he wrote to U

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

I am greatly concerned that USDA/Aphis is about to make a decision concerning the deregulation of "Roundup Al so called "market requirement" influences on what is supposed to be a "science based" EIS conclusion and recomr

As a farmer and alfalfa seed producer in Wyoming I have been anxiously awaiting the EIS on this very important i contract expired. I have been denied the opportunity to raise the crop of my choice for several years while this EI me money in lost production while I wait for the EIS. I have reluctantly accepted this because I agree that we mus the legal right to raise RR Alfalfa Seed I have two organic growers, east and west of me, that have continued to enj These organic operations have suffered no economic injury these past 4 years. I have actually suffered loss of inco years because my right to grow RR Alfalfa Seed has been restricted. IF some illegal "buffer zone" is enacted who v or my organic neighbors? This issue would be one of many to decide if option III with geographic restrictions is er

With no disrespect intended, Mr. Secretary, it is now time for USDA/Aphis to continue to follow the law and comp wish, to plant RR Alfalfa Forage and produce RR Alfalfa Seed with NO restrictions.

The very extensive EIS that was done by your agency has concluded that GE Alfalfa poses NO PLANT PEST RISK required, needed or mandated considering that the EIS has come to this conclusion. Indeed, 7 U.S.C. 7712(a) stat restrictions on this crop.

Again, I and the alfalfa industry as a whole, have patiently followed the law in NOT planting or continuing to grow follow the law just as we have.

In answer to the organic community's complaints I would offer the following:

1) In the NOP standards, rules and regulations I would assume GMO crops would come under the category of a seems to be the only place GMO crops might fit in and there is no specific reference as to WHAT organic standard:

2)There is no statement, rule or regulation specifically mentioning any reference to "GMO" or "GE" crops so th

3)The NOP regulations themselves put any burden there MAY be on the organic farmers themselves. (consider the GMO crop of Alfalfa has been determined to NOT be a "PLANT PEST").

4)The NOP regulations recognize there may be "background levels of synthetic pesticides" of which they refer t or "UREC". This "residual contamination" as they describe it would also fall into the category of "prohibited subst a GMO crop"? It seems that the presence of a GMO crop is being singled out as some unacceptable contaminant and products are EXCEPTED as "unavoidable".

5)Given the acknowledgement of "unavoidable contamination" and the tolerance (5% of EPA tolerance) for "pr require actions to minimize any contamination of the organic crop. These are recognized measures such as "buffe prevent drift of prohibited substances". When these measures are taken by an organic grower they are considered even with the presence of these "prohibited substances" in the final organic product. In other words an organic er

GMO traits can be certified to be 100% organic provided all guidelines of growing the crop are followed. Organic C "ZERO TOLERANCE FOR PROHIBITED SUBSTANCES".

In conclusion I would offer the following summation concerning organic growers:

Organic growers may be found in compliance with organic requirements, even if GMO's are found in the final p violation of organic requirements. The NOP standards along with the rules and regulations that are attached to th organic growers in the United States. They have been introduced, modified and adopted by the vast majority of or percentage of organic growers who wish to enter into contact with a buyer, foreign or domestic, and guarantee th he is doing so at his own risk and should be the only party accountable for that contract requirement and that addi

The means for organic growers and gmo growers to "coexist" are already in place within the NOP Standards. If th grower of a GMO crop I will suffer the same level of contamination that the organic grower MAY suffer from my cr crop is readily identified with a simple test. The contamination I will suffer from the organic crop is not easily ide

The fact is, the company that I contract with expects and understands it to be minimal. The organic grower would crop could be a "plant pest". The EIS done by your agency has determined that GMO Alfalfa is NOT A PLANT PEST

I urge you to follow the law, acknowledge the EIS, and deregulate ALFALFA FORAGE and ALFALFA SEED production RESTRICTIONS so that those of us who wish to raise a GMO crop can again enjoy the freedom to plant the crop or enough and our rights need to be recognized. THANK YOU Mr. Secretary.

from the author

In last week's story entitled, 'Organic Industry Calls For Biotech Accountability,' a reference was made to genetically commercially available GM wheat on the market.

In 2004, Monsanto abandoned efforts to commercialize Roundup Ready herbicide-resistant wheat following protests from organic groups. However, last July, Monsanto announced that it would reenter the GM wheat arena. Rather than herbicide-tolerant wheat, they are developing new engineered varieties that give "higher yields, better nutrition, and greater resistance to drought, diseases, and pests."

In his comments pertaining to current study comparisons to Kamut, Mr. Quinn was alluding to "conventional" wheat.

From Bob Quinn

Bob writes that his comments regarding dead zones in the Gulf referred to nitrate run-off not GM crop production.

Also, any who would like to read studies comparing Kamut brand wheat to modern wheat can visit Kamut.com.

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