

No to Mutant Food?

Activists counter federal deregulation by seeking a state moratorium of genetically modified crops

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Food activist Gianni Ortiz is calling for statewide moratoriums on recently approved genetically modified organisms (GMOs) following the United States Department of Agriculture's recent actions on three genetically modified crops.

Late in January, the USDA fully deregulated genetically engineered (GE) alfalfa. The move shocked many, as conversations between the federal agency and the variety of industries it regulates, including both organic agriculture and biotechnology, had previously been about negotiating coexistence.

The partial deregulation of genetically modified (GM) sugar beets, and the full deregulation of GE corn for ethanol, occurred in the weeks that followed.

"President Obama is the only one who can reverse this decision at this point, unless states exert home rule and put moratoriums in place immediately," said Ortiz in a press release.

Filmmaker Michael Moore and *Democracy Now's* Amy Goodman are reviewing the FarmAssist Productions' fact sheet as the organizer seeks access to star power that could put the issue front and center.

GMOs are banned or restricted in 30 countries, including the European Union, Australia and Japan. This fact creates a problem for potential exports from the United States, though biotech concerns are fighting to get products into Great Britain, which would ease the way for entry throughout the EU.

Estimates place the presence of GMOs at 70 to 80 percent in packaged foods in America and Canada, as commercially grown canola, soy, corn, and cotton are already using genetically modified seeds.

The recent deregulations, especially of alfalfa, have been decried by supporters of organic foods because once the 21 million acres of alfalfa in the United States are planted with GE alfalfa, there's no way to protect the organic alfalfa fed to the nation's organic dairy herds.

The irony, as many see it, is that conventionally grown alfalfa does not use a lot of herbicides. Therefore, Monsanto's winning approval for GE alfalfa is seen as a market grab, creating a space to sell a product that is unnecessary: Roundup.

Roundup is the brand of herbicide glyphosate owned by Monsanto; genetically engineered seeds can be treated to withstand applications of Roundup. Ortiz cites Roundup as accounting for about 50 percent of Monsanto's profits. Aside from the corporate coups for Big Agriculture, critics contend that the recent spate of deregulation is problematic for the health of people and soils.

Dr. Don Huber, retired plant pathologist from Purdue University, has researched the affects of Roundup, and found glyphosate indicated in 40 plant diseases. Huber recently sent a letter to the USDA stating that colleagues had found a pathogen responsible for infertility and spontaneous abortion in livestock. Huber and other scientists are calling for research to see if the pathogen is traceable to glyphosate.

By calling for Gov. Andrew Cuomo to issue a moratorium on new GMOs in the state, Ortiz hopes to stop farmers from planting GE alfalfa this spring.

This is in line with other grassroots battles against GMOs in the United States. While activists in Europe have fought genetically engineered seeds by destroying them and ripping up planted fields, actions in this country have focused on local bans and court fights.

The Center for Food Safety issued an immediate legal challenge as soon as GE alfalfa was deregulated. Other state-level action lies in a number of bills that address GMOs, which have been circulating for sessions in the New York State Legislature. However, no legislator has initiated GMO legislation since the federal deregulations.

Other activists are calling for a boycott of Land O'Lakes, because the company was instrumental in rushing the alfalfa ruling. Additionally, a new tool was unveiled Tuesday to help people track GM alfalfa. Using software developed to illustrate violence in elections in Kenya, called the Ushahidi Platform, people can identify fields planted with or contaminated with GM alfalfa at nogmoalfalfa.com or gmoalfalfa.com