

New Attack on GM Food Safety Testing Standards

Media Statement – EMBARGOED until 1 am, 7 February 2007

Australian and New Zealand regulators are failing to resist an audacious bid by GM plant developers to have them abandon a fundamental principle of food safety testing.

The internationally accepted baseline for assessing the safety of a GM food is to conduct studies that consistently compare it with the closest non-GM relative. Such a ‘comparator’ is considered the standard because of its long history of safe use as a food for people.

Last December, Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) recommended approving a new GMO as safe for human consumption even though the studies submitted in support of its safety compared it to another GMO variety that has no history of safe use. The Minister for Food Safety, Annette King, now has just 5 days left to respond to that recommendation.

The GMO in question is Monsanto’s ‘high lysine’ GM corn (called LY038), an animal feed that is unlike any GM corn varieties commercialised to date due to its substantially different nutritional profile.

There are compelling reasons to believe that LY038 could produce a unique spectrum of food hazards because LY038 has extremely high concentrations of the free amino acid lysine and its derivatives. When cooked, these substances may form chemicals that are strongly implicated in causing certain diseases or their symptoms, including diabetes, Alzheimer’s and cancer.

Monsanto is seeking approval for this animal feed to be a legal human food because of the difficulty of preventing it from entering the food chain. FSANZ claims that if approved, only very small proportions of the new corn would become human food. However, even small quantities of such substances pose food safety risks and once approval is given, there is no upper limit on the proportion of LY038 corn that can legally enter the human food supply.

The deeper issue is the precedent-setting nature of any decision to approve a new GMO on the basis of studies that do not consistently test it against its conventional counterpart. If New Zealand and Australia deem that abandoning the international standard is acceptable in this case, they may lose the ability to use it to challenge future GM crops that also rely on GMOs as test comparators.

Further, once one GM bio-industrial product is accepted as a food on this basis, the stage is set for a raft of other products – including plants producing industrial and medical substances – to be approved using this lower safety standard. The novelty of this wave of new GMOs should be driving adherence to the highest standards, rather than the breach of a key safety principle.

The minister should use her statutory powers to require FSANZ to undertake a review and seek to have Monsanto provide new safety studies using the appropriate non-GM comparator (a corn variety called H99 that is the closest non-GMO relative of LY038). This is consistent with the approach set out in Codex guidelines and is a principle that should not be abandoned.

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Notes:

1. Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) issued a draft recommendation to the Ministerial Council, of which Annette King is a member, on December 14 2006. From there, the Minister has a statutory 60 days within which to respond to that recommendation.
2. International guidelines for food safety testing have been laid down by a joint WHO/FAO body - the Codex Alimentarius Commission. The Codex test protocol for biotech foods specifies that testing be carried out by comparing characteristics of the new GM food with a “conventional counterpart”. The 2003 guideline further notes that: “for the foreseeable future, foods derived from modern biotechnology will not be used as conventional counterparts”. If GM varieties are accepted as safe comparators, the fundamental rationale of the testing protocol is undercut.

The Centre for Integrated Research in Biosafety (University of Canterbury, New Zealand) has produced several analyses of Monsanto’s application and the food safety issues raised by LY038. See: <http://www.inbi.canterbury.ac.nz/ly038.shtml>