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One fifth of US rice contaminated with illegal GM strain



'Genetic engineering - hands off', the label says on a plate of rice

contaminated with an illegal GM variety

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Up to one fifth of rice entering the EU is contaminated with an illegal genetically modified (GM) strain from the US. Those are the findings of the European Commission's own investigation into EU rice imports, following the admission in August by the US government that untested strains of GM rice had entered the food chain.

If that wasn't alarming enough, our own research has shown this rice has made its way into products available in German supermarkets. Coming just one week after we revealed how [Chinese products containing another illegal and untested GM rice variety](#) were available on supermarket shelves in the UK and Europe, these results illustrate the inability of the GM industry to control its own technologies.

Out of 162 shipments of US long grain rice examined by the Commission, 33 tested positive for a strain of rice produced by agribusiness giant Bayer. The rice, LL601 as it's officially known, has been engineered to be resistant to Bayer's own herbicides but it has not been approved for human consumption anywhere in the world. Currently, no varieties of GM rice have been approved for growing or consumption in the EU, although Bayer are trying to clear some of their other rice strains that have been approved in the US and Canada.

Illegal and untested

The rice was grown in the US in 2001 but only as a test crop and the effects on human health are unknown. Worrying, then, that it is now present on the shelves of Aldi Nord, a major German supermarket. Aldi Nord has since removed the affected products from its shelves but with Germany importing about 25 per cent of its rice from the US, the contamination could have spread much further.

There is already evidence to suggest this is the case. Testing by France and Sweden has shown that LL601 has washed up on their shores although this needs to be verified. Meanwhile in the Netherlands, 20,000 tonnes of rice from the US have been detained in Rotterdam and out of 23 shipments tested so far, three came up positive. In the UK, the government is detaining all shipments of US long grain rice until they are confirmed contamination-free.

Speaking to [Deutsche Welle](#), Ulrike Brendel, Greenpeace Germany GM campaigner, explained that the evidence is overwhelming. "The fact we're finding it [in supermarkets] shows that the industry isn't capable of controlling genetically modified crops. We don't know what human health or environmental risks are involved. If we want to keep food sources free of genetically modified material, then we can't afford to plant GM crops."

So what's to be done? Testing of rice and rice products on a worldwide scale would solve the problem in the short term but isn't a long term solution. Jeremy Tager, GM rice campaigner with Greenpeace International, is quite clear about what is required.

"Once illegal GM crops are in the food chain, removing them takes enormous effort and cost," he said. "It is easier to prevent contamination in the first place and stop any plans to commercialise GM rice."

Get active

You can have your say on the future of GM crops and food in the UK. The government is holding a consultation and you can submit your comments on their proposals. [Friends of the Earth have produced an action pack](#) with all you need to know to make your voice heard. so you don't need to be an expert on GM food, all you need is an opinion.

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