

National

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USDA: Rice supply contaminated with unapproved variety

But agency chief says grain poses no threat to health or to environment

By RICK WEISS
Washington Post

WASHINGTON — Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns announced late Friday that U.S. commercial supplies of long-grain rice had become inadvertently contaminated with a genetically engineered variety not approved for human consumption.


Johanns said the company that made the experimental rice, Bayer CropScience of Monheim, Germany, had provided information to the Agriculture Department and the Food and Drug Administration indicating that the rice poses no threats to human health or the environment.

"Based upon the information we have seen, this product is safe," he said in a telephone news conference.

Johanns said he did not know where the contaminated rice was found or how widespread it may be in the U.S. food chain.

The agency first learned about it from the company, he said, after it discovered "trace amounts" during testing of commercial supplies.

The variety, known as LLRICE 601, is endowed with bacterial DNA that makes rice plants resistant to a weed killer made by the agricultural giant Aventis.



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Johanns acknowledged that the discovery could have a significant impact on rice sales — especially exports, which are worth close to \$1 billion a year.

Many U.S. trading partners have strict policies forbidding importation of certain genetically engineered foods.

Those restrictions reflect a mix of science-based fears that some gene-altered foods or seeds may pose health or environmental hazards, cultural beliefs about food purity, and political wrangling over trade disparities.

New accusations triggered

Friday's announcement quickly prompted a new round of accusations that the government is failing in its efforts to regulate and contain the burgeoning field of agricultural biotechnology, in which genes from various organisms are being added to crops and other plants — usually to confer resistance to weed-killers or to make the plants produce their own insecticides.

"How many incidents will it take before the government takes their oversight of the biotech industry seriously?" asked Gregory Jaffe, director of the biotechnology project at the Center for Science in the Public Interest in Washington.

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