

Quick, quiet genetic corn approval questioned

BY MICHELLE LALONDE, CANWEST NEWS SERVICE JULY 25, 2009

MONTREAL — The Canadian Food Inspection Agency has quietly approved a new genetically engineered corn with eight different insect- and weed-fighting traits, but farmer and environmental groups in Canada say the approval was rushed and environmental risks ignored.

Developed through a research agreement between Monsanto and Dow AgroSciences, SmartStax corn is unique in that it “stacks” eight different genetically engineered traits that will allow corn to tolerate certain weed- and insect-killing products made by the two companies.

Each of the eight traits has been individually approved by the CFIA, but opponents are concerned there might be unintended consequences when the traits are combined.

“You’d think that a combination of eight GE traits would trigger an environmental assessment, but the CFIA has (provided) no public record of their evaluation,” said Lucy Sharratt, co-ordinator of the Canadian Biotechnology Action Network.

The CFIA has also conditionally authorized for SmartStax a reduction in the size of the buffer zone, or “refuge,” normally required around genetically engineered corn.

Farmers who grow insect-resistant corn have to plant regular corn around it in an area equal to 20 per cent of the GE cornfield. This is to delay the evolution of insect resistance to the toxins in the GE corn, which would then necessitate the use of stronger pesticides.

CFIA officials were not available for comment Friday. A short statement on its website said “the CFIA has evaluated the potential impact on and risk to the environment of using a 5 per cent non-Bt refuge strategy for this product, and has concluded that a conditional authorization until Dec. 31, 2012, of the use of this refuge poses minimal risk to the environment.”

“Not only did the CFIA neglect to do a risk evaluation for SmartStax corn, but it has also seriously reduced one of the only precautions imposed on farmers,” said Benoit Girouard of Quebec’s Union Paysanne, a farmers’ group.

Between now and December 2012, the CFIA statement said, Monsanto and Dow are required to evaluate how insects like corn rootworm are adapting to the product.

“It’s like putting the wolf in charge of the sheep’s welfare,” said Eric Darier, director of Greenpeace Quebec.

In May, the American Academy of Environmental Medicine called for an immediate moratorium on genetically modified foods, saying they pose a “serious health risk.”

Montreal Gazette

mlalonde@thegazette.canwest.com

© Copyright (c) The Montreal Gazette