

Genetically Modified Foods

Demand for labeling and GM-free zones a growing response to health and environmental concerns.

Michelle Hancock, HANS staff writer

The recent approval of genetically modified (GM) sugar beets in Canada leaves a bad taste in the mouth of anti-GM campaigners. Sugar beets provide about half of our sugar (the other half is from imported sugar cane). Crops are grown in southern Alberta and Ontario, with more expected in 2008 and a sugar beet ethanol plant planned for Prince Edward Island. "Sugar is in almost everything," says Angela Nat, a concerned consumer in Burnaby, BC. "I guess I'll have to start drinking my coffee black."

GM foods are either whole foods or foods that contain ingredients in which specific genes have been manipulated to enhance a desired trait. These particular sugar beets are "Roundup Ready," meaning they've been modified by Monsanto for resistance to the agrochemical giant's infamous herbicide. Other GM foods, or "novel foods" as they're often called, in Canada are corn, potatoes, rice, canola, cotton, soy and tomatoes. An estimated 70 percent of processed foods contain GM ingredients.

Health Canada has approved more than 100 novel foods and processes have been approved since 1994.¹ Given their prevalence, why the ongoing urge for precaution? For starters, no long-term studies exist on the impact of GM foods on human health. Potential risks associated with GM foods include allergic reactions, the development of antibiotic resistance, and the creation of toxins.

The US Food and Drug Administration pushed GM technology ahead in the early 1990s despite warnings that it was unsafe, according to Jeffrey M. Smith, executive director of the Institute for Responsible Technology, in his book *Seeds of Deception: The Truth about GM Foods*. Contrary to marketing claims, it has also been shown that farmers actually use more—86 percent more—herbicide on GM soy fields compared to non-GM soy. GM crops can and have contaminated non-GM crops. A very recent addition to the approved GM-food list in the United States, Rice LL601 by Bayer, has already globally resulted in contamination costs of US \$1.3 billion.²

There have been 142 cases of GM contamination worldwide, including nine in Canada in the past 10 years.³ In December 2007, a Greenpeace investigation found GM-contaminated rice—a rice not approved for human consumption—in supermarkets in Vancouver and Montreal.⁴ "There are no assurances that this GM rice is safe for people to eat," says Josh Brandon, Greenpeace agriculture campaigner. "Even if GM food was labelled, which it isn't anywhere in Canada, we would not know about the presence of this variety because of lax testing on the part of the authorities."

More than 40 countries now require GM labels. "Canada

is really falling behind the pack on this," says Brandon.⁵ "Seventy-nine percent of British Columbians, according to a December 2006 poll, want mandatory labeling," he adds.

GE Free BC (www.gefreebc.org/), working with Greenpeace, is another resource for ways to stay informed. The two groups have come together to support community anti-GM initiatives in BC. One such project is the creation of GM-free zones, such as what the city of Powell River has initiated. GM-free zones have successfully opposed the GM tide in Europe, Japan, Austria and the US, mostly at municipal level in the form of unofficial bylaws. Europe boasts more than 4,500 GM-free zones.

A GM-free petition asking for a 10-year moratorium on the planting of GM seed in the Yukon was tabled in 2007.

For the latest news, email gefree@yukonfood.com.

In November 2007, Nelson-area residents met to begin strategizing. For more info on this campaign, email Aimee Watson at eemiamay@yahoo.ca.

Strategy sessions are also beginning in March 2008 in Comox, BC. E-mail Tony Beck at gefreebc07@yahoo.com.

Greenpeace is also on a petition drive for mandatory labelling, and they want as many signatures as possible.

Download the petition at www.greenpeace.ca.

When it comes to GM foods, consumers deserve the right to know, and the freedom to choose.

Health Action Network Society (HANS) supports public awareness of GM foods. HANS hosted an event with GMO expert Jeffrey M. Smith in fall 2006. DVDs, books and audios are available by calling 604-435-0512. see ad below

¹ Approved Products, Novel Food Decisions, Health Canada, accessed Jan 5, 2008, http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/gmf-agm/appro/index_e.html#ftn1

² Costly contamination: \$1.285 billion (US) in damages caused by genetically-engineered rice <http://www.greenpeace.org/canada/en/campaigns/ge/latest-developments/costly-genetically-engineered-contamination>

³ GM Contamination Register February 2007 <http://www.greenpeace.org/canada/en/campaigns/ge/gm-contamination-register>

⁴ Government fails to detect illegal, genetically engineered variety 17 December 2007 <http://www.greenpeace.org/canada/en/campaigns/ge/latest-developments/rice-on-canadian-store-shelves>

⁵ Phone Interview with Josh Brandon, Greenpeace GM Campaigner.

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