

## **Gene Campaign and Friends of the Earth / Europe Oppose Proposal for Importing GM Rice into the EU**

Gene Campaign and Friends of the Earth Europe have conveyed their strong objections and concerns to the European Commission regarding the proposed permission to be given to Bayer Crop Science Ltd. for importing genetically modified herbicide tolerant rice (LLRice62) into the EU, as animal feed. They have requested that this permission not be granted to Bayer, since it would have grave implications for the natural rice germplasm in rice growing areas of the developing world. Gene Campaign Convenor, Dr. Suman Sahai pointed out that both organisations have emphasized that the rice that Bayer proposes to import would have to be grown in developing countries like India. It is noteworthy that Bayer's application is only for the import and processing of genetically modified (GM) rice into the European Union. Bayer has not sought permission for cultivation because it doesn't intend to grow this GM rice in Europe although rice is cultivated in five EU member states – Italy, Spain, Greece, Portugal and France.

Gene Campaign, which is asking for a moratorium on the cultivation of GM crops in their centre of origin and diversity, is alarmed that India could be tempted to produce GM rice for the EU market. Dr. Suman Sahai said it is particularly ironic that India and other centres of diversity for rice could end up jeopardising their principal food source for producing animal feed to support the meat consumption of the west. There is something decidedly unethical about Bayer wanting to protect the few rice-growing states of the EU by not seeking permission for cultivation in Spain, Italy, Greece, Portugal or France. In applying to import GM rice for animal feed from developing countries, the corporation demonstrates its callous disregard for human life and food security in the poorer regions of the world. It is willing to put at risk the food staple of these poor people to support the unsustainable consumption of the west.

Gene Campaign and Friends of the Earth Europe are greatly concerned about the potential adverse impacts of Bayer's application in developing countries like India where rice is grown and where the regulatory framework for GMOs is weak or even non-existent. Farmers in such countries are not aware of the larger issues and the possible implications of GM rice in their fields and thus not really able to take an informed decision on whether or not to grow the rice. Gene Campaign fears that opening the EU market for GM rice would be a lure for rice producing nations to cultivate GM rice for the export market. It would be relatively easy to sell this proposal in the domestic context, because of the potential for export earnings, but this would overlook the very critical threat of genetic contamination in rice diversity areas like the Jeypore tract in Orissa, Jharkhand and Chattisgarh.

Gene Campaign stresses that India is one of the centres of origin and diversity for rice and has substantial concerns about the possibility of genetic contamination of native rice genepools. The importance of protecting this as a world resource for global food security cannot be overstated. Resistance to two of the four main diseases afflicting rice comes from a single landrace, *Oryza nivara* that is found in central India.

Gene Campaign considers GM rice to be a particularly sensitive issue for India and one where the Precautionary Principle must be invoked because the implications of genetic contamination in rice can be very grave indeed for farmers and for food security. No studies are being conducted in India to understand the levels of gene flow in rice, to assess what would happen if foreign genes were to escape from GM rice to farmers' varieties and wild relatives of rice.

The Agbiotech industry is quick to project that there is no danger of foreign gene flow in rice because it is a self pollinating crop (and would not accept genes from GM crops), but evidence is mounting that this is not the case. Recent studies show that gene flow in rice happens and should be cause for concern.

Recent research from China demonstrates that transgene escape from cultivated rice to wild rice (*Oryza rufipogon*) does occur in the field<sup>1</sup>. This would mean that foreign genes could spread easily in the native population. Another recent study done in Latin America to look at the transfer of herbicide tolerant genes (same as in Bayer's rice) to wild relatives of rice, showed that this transfer does indeed take place. The study also predicted that herbicide resistant weedy rice populations would develop quite quickly, within 3 to 8 years<sup>2</sup>.

Gene Campaign and Friends of the Earth/Europe are of the view that the EU has a moral obligation to undertake the most thorough and exhaustive analysis of the safety of this new GM crop. It is equally bound to assess the social, economic and environmental implications in developing countries, of allowing such imports, before considering any permission

Suman Sahai  
Gene Campaign  
[genecamp@vsnl.com](mailto:genecamp@vsnl.com)

Geert Ritsema  
Friends of the Earth Europe  
[geert.ritsema@foeeurope.org](mailto:geert.ritsema@foeeurope.org)

---

<sup>1</sup> Chen LJ et al. (2004) Gene flow from cultivated rice (*Oryza sativa*) to its weedy and wild relatives  
*Annals of Botany* 93 (1): 67-73

<sup>2</sup> Madsen KH, Valverde BE, Jensen JE (2002) Risk assessment of herbicide-resistant crops: A Latin American perspective using rice (*Oryza sativa*) as a model *Weed* 16 (1): 215-223