



National Organic Coalition

Contacts: Lisa Bunin, Ph.D., Center for Food Safety: 415-826-2770
Liana Hoodes, National Organic Coalition: 845-744-2304

More Than 200,000 NGOs, Farmers, Consumers, and Organic Producers
Call for USDA to Prohibit Genetically Engineered Alfalfa

Resulting contamination of non-GE and organic alfalfa hay and seed would devastate livelihoods and organic industry

WASHINGTON, March 3, 2010 – The National Organic Coalition (NOC) today announced that more than 200,000 people submitted comments to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) critiquing the substance and conclusions of its Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) on Genetically Engineered (GE) Alfalfa. Groups, including NOC, Center for Food Safety (CFS), Organic Consumers Association, Food & Water Watch, CREDO Action and Food Democracy Now, mobilized their communities to help generate the unprecedented number of comments.

In addition, more than 300 public interest organizations, farmers, dairies, retailers and organic food producers from the U.S. and Canada delivered a strongly worded letter to USDA, calling upon it to deny approval of Monsanto's genetically engineered, Roundup Ready alfalfa (GE alfalfa). The letter cites the inevitable contamination of organic and non-GE alfalfa hay and seeds and threats to the viability of organic dairies, livestock, and meat and dairy producers as reasons for urging the denial. NOC, Organic Valley, Whole Foods, National Cooperative Grocers Association, CFS and others agree that it would be irresponsible government policy to approve GE alfalfa in the absence of legal requirements holding companies accountable for GE contamination, as is currently the case.

In 2006, CFS sued USDA for its illegal approval of Monsanto's GE alfalfa. USDA failed to conduct an environmental impact statement (EIS), as required by law, before deregulating the crop.ⁱ The federal courts sided with CFS and banned GE alfalfa plantings until USDA analyzed the impacts of GE alfalfa on the environment, farmers and the public. Today marks the deadline for submitting public comments on the draft EIS, which recommends approving Monsanto's GE alfalfa.

USDA's EIS claims that organic consumers do not care about GE contamination of their food, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Consumer surveys show that 75 percent or more of respondents repeatedly say that they do not want to eat GE contaminated food and cite their desire to avoid GE food as one of the top five reasons for buying organic.ⁱⁱ

“GE alfalfa threatens the very fabric of the organic industry,” adds George Siemon, one of the founding farmers and CEO of Organic Valley. “Organic consumers want seeds and products to remain unpolluted by GE.”

Independent, empirical studies and past experience show that containment of GE pollen and seeds is not possible. GE alfalfa pollen can travel six miles or more in the air, via bees or other pollinators.ⁱⁱⁱ Seeds can also travel long distances on harvesting equipment and on the boots and in the trucks of people who work in fields and transport hay and seeds. More than 200 known cases of GE contamination have been documented within the last decade. The most serious and immediate cases of contamination are in canola (rapeseed) crops. Due to widespread contamination, canola crops and oil can no longer be marketed as organic or non-GE in Western Canada.

“The continued deregulation of GE crops threatens our food supply and the diverse organic and conventional farming systems that have fed the world’s growing population for centuries,” said Lisa J. Bunin, Ph.D., Organic Policy Coordinator at Center for Food Safety. “It is unconscionable for USDA to increasingly allow the concentration of our nation’s seed supply in the hands of a few GE companies that produce a limited number of novel, pesticide-promoting seed varieties.”

Despite the inevitable contamination from GE alfalfa, the EIS disavows this harm and places the entire burden for preventing contamination on non-GE farmers, with no protections for food producers, consumers and exporters. “If Roundup Ready Alfalfa is permitted to be sold commercially, the ripple effect would wipe out many organic and non-GE businesses, from organic seed and forage growers to organic dairy farmers and retailers,” said Liana Hoodes, Director, National Organic Coalition. “Every American’s right to cultivate, sell and eat non-GE and organic food would no longer exist.”

Even though the EIS acknowledges that GE alfalfa would increase Roundup herbicide use, since the vast majority of alfalfa farmers do not use *any* herbicides at all (93 percent), it omits the fact that planting GE alfalfa would require many farmers to use Roundup *for the very first time*. This would result in the spread of toxic chemicals in regions where such toxins were previously non-existent. Over the past 13 years, the planting of GE crops has *significantly* increased herbicide use on corn, soybeans and cotton - by 383 million pounds.^{iv} GE alfalfa deregulation would markedly add to that high toxic burden on the environment.

"Our genetic gene pool is extremely valuable, and we can't afford to destroy it by handing it over to the biotech companies," warns Conventional South Dakota alfalfa seed and hay grower, Chuck Noble. "If we've learned anything from Europe's potato famines when millions starved to death, humans need seed variety to protect against blight and famine. Genetic engineering severely compromises that diversity."

To receive updates on GE alfalfa and action alerts for other food issues, consumers can visit Center for Food Safety (www.truefoodnow.org) and join the True Food Network community.

About the National Organic Coalition

The National Organic Coalition (NOC) is a national alliance of organizations working to provide a "Washington voice" for farmers, ranchers, environmentalists, consumers and progressive industry members involved in organic agriculture. NOC seeks to work cooperatively with, and add value to, existing organic and sustainable agriculture organizations, networks and coalitions to ensure a united voice for organic integrity.

ⁱ An EIS is a rigorous analysis of the potential significant environmental, economic, and social impacts of a federal decision, as required under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

ⁱⁱ Organic Community Comments to APHIS, *Proposed Rule and Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement for the Introduction of Genetically Engineered Organisms*, APHIS Docket 2008-002, June 29, 2009. The Hartman Group. (2006) "Consumer Attitudes & Behavior, Five Years Later & Into the Future."

ⁱⁱⁱ United States Department of Agriculture. Glyphosate-Tolerant Alfalfa Events J101 and J163: Request for Nonregulated Status. Draft Environmental Impact Statement—November 2009. P.95.

^{iv} <http://truefoodnow.org/2009/11/17/new-report-reveals-dramatic-rise-in-pesticide-use-on-genetically-engineered-crops-due-to-the-spread-of-resistant-weeds/>