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USDA Approval of Drug-Producing Rice in Kansas Poses Threat to Food Safety, Say Food Safety & Farming Groups

Tornadoes, Floods Could Contaminate Foods
With Drugs Not Approved By FDA

20,000 Citizens, Scientists, Farming and Rice Organizations In Opposition

WASHINGTON — The Center for Food Safety, Kansas Rural Center and Farmer to Farmer Campaign on Genetic Engineering object to USDA's May 16th approval of drug-producing rice cultivation in Kansas, charging that it poses needless risks to the safety of the American food supply. USDA's approval permits cultivation in the Junction City area of up to 3,200 acres of rice genetically engineered to produce pharmaceutical compounds that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has refused to approve. FDA approval is not required for planting to proceed.

The groups note that the decision comes just a week after tornadoes in the Kansas River Valley and heavy rains caused severe flooding in east-central Kansas, including floodwaters on the Smoky Hill River, which passes just a mile from one of the proposed planting sites. USDA had earlier dismissed concerns raised by the groups that floodwaters could carry the pharmaceutical rice into surrounding cropland and contaminate farmers' crops with drugs unapproved by the FDA. USDA concluded in its environmental assessment that: "Extreme weather events are rare and unlikely to occur in the area of the field trial."

"About two weeks ago, I was huddled with other travelers in a rest stop on Interstate 70 as tornadoes were reported on the ground in the very area where Ventria proposes to expand their production between Junction City and Topeka," said Dan Nagengast, Executive Director of the Kansas Rural Center.

"I also question whether the company has adequately engineered their water control systems to deal with the amounts of torrential rainfall that are quite common here. This just represents an unconscionable food safety complication in a food-producing region. Why grow these crops in wide open nature, when other companies have found it possible to use genetic engineering techniques to produce biotech drugs in confined settings where food contamination is not an issue?"

USDA approved the “pharma rice” plantings despite receiving 20,000 comments in opposition from citizens, scientists, farming and rice groups. Groups opposing the scheme include the USA Rice Federation, U.S. Rice Producers Association, Riceland Foods, Mississippi Rice Council, Arkansas Rice Growers Association, Missouri Rice Research and Merchandising Council, and Rice Producers of California. In addition, fourteen independent scientists signed a joint scientific assessment warning of potential adverse health impacts from even trace-level exposure to one of the rice-produced drugs.

“These rice-grown drugs are unapproved by FDA, may be hazardous, and whether hazardous or not could cause huge economic losses to Kansas farmers whose wheat, soy or other crops become contaminated with drug rice,” said Bill Freese, Science Policy Analyst with Center for Food Safety.

“In 2002, corn containing an experimental swine vaccine got mixed into soybeans and regular corn, which then had to be destroyed at a cost of several millions dollars,” said Nagengast. “Over the past year, rice farmers have lost millions of dollars from contamination of their crop with unapproved genetically engineered rice grown under USDA’s watch,” he added.

“The USDA needs to stop rubber-stamping schemes like drug-producing crops that put farmers and the rural economies they support at great risk,” said Bill Wenzel, National Director of the Farmer to Farmer Campaign on Genetic Engineering. “The USDA should be focused on representing farmers rather than carrying water for the biotech industry,” he added.

Developed by California-based Ventria Bioscience, the rice is engineered with modified human genes to serve as a “biofactory” for production of synthetic human milk proteins that have antimicrobial and other drug-like properties. Ventria has proposed using the rice-extracted protein drugs to treat infants with diarrhea, and as additives in infant formulas, yogurt, granola bars and sports drinks, among other uses.

Last month, the Center for Food Safety released a report detailing the potential human health impacts of Ventria’s pharmaceutical rice and the FDA’s refusal to approve Ventria’s rice-grown drugs. The report, “A Grain of Caution,” also disputes the need for Ventria’s pharmaceutical rice, discussing cheap and effective solutions for prevention and treatment of diarrhea recommended by the World Health Organization and other public health experts. The report notes that these existing solutions have cut deaths due to diarrhea from 4.6 million a year in 1980 to 2 million today, and could save many more lives if adequate funding were provided.

Center for Food Safety’s “A Grain of Caution” is available at:
<http://www.centerforfoodsafety.org/pubs/Pharmaceutical%20Rice-FINAL.pdf>

For Center for Food Safety’s comments to USDA warning of contamination and other risks, see:
http://www.centerforfoodsafety.org/pubs/Biopharm%20Rice%20Kansas%20comments_final.pdf

Center for Food Safety is a national non-profit membership organization working to protect human health and the environment by curbing the use of harmful food production technologies and promoting sustainable agriculture. In 2000/2001, CFS was part of a coalition that discovered widespread contamination of the food supply with genetically engineered StarLink corn, which had not been approved for human consumption due to concerns it could cause food allergies. In the past year, CFS has won three cases against USDA for the Agriculture Department’s reckless and illegal approval of genetically engineered crops. See www.centerforfoodsafety.org

The Kansas Rural Center is a non-profit research, education and advocacy organization that promotes environmentally sound farming practices and a safe and healthy food system, benefiting both farmers and consumers. See www.kansasruralcenter.org

The Farmer to Farmer Campaign on Genetic Engineering was formed in 1999 to provide a national voice for farmers on agriculture biotechnology. The Campaign provides education, training and support to farmers and farm groups on agricultural biotechnology issues.