



Activists Sue USDA to Block Herbicide-Resistant Alfalfa

By: Kenneth Artz
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Continuing their assault on improvements in agricultural technology, environmental activists have launched a lawsuit against the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) for approving alfalfa modified to resist Roundup weed killer.

The Center for Food Safety (CFS), an anti-technology activist group, filed suit on March 18, claiming USDA relied on faulty information and ignored evidence that Roundup resistant alfalfa will harm organic growers by contaminating organic alfalfa.

Bureaucratic Gauntlet

Greg Conko, a senior fellow at the Competitive Enterprise Institute, points out the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), which took effect in 1970, forces all federal government agencies to consider the effects any “major actions” they take may have on the “human environment.”

According to Conko, a loose interpretation of the “human environment” clause forces the USDA to prepare a comprehensive Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for Roundup-resistant alfalfa. An EIS typically requires thousands of man-hours, details every imaginable effect, and runs to hundreds or even thousands of pages.

In the case of Roundup resistant alfalfa, USDA found no significant impact on the environment. But CFS is claiming cross-pollination between GM alfalfa and organic crops will cause organic growers to lose their certification.

“The underlying premise of the CFS lawsuit is false since the USDA already performed an EIS and found no evidence of cross-pollination. This will force the agency to go back and look at the effect on the environment again,” Conko said.

Attrition Strategy

“Basically the radical environmentalists want [to force] biotech crop manufacturers to spend hundreds of millions of dollars [defending themselves against] nuisance lawsuits to make the process as expensive and unpredictable as possible and discourage others from investing in

research. Ultimately they want to halt any new products from being developed and to get all biotech products off the market,” Conko explained.

According to **H. Sterling Burnett**, a senior fellow with the **National Center for Policy Analysis**, this is just a case of environmentalists being environmentalists.

“Although there is no evidence linking Roundup-resistant alfalfa to harm, the radical environmentalists will never be satisfied. They’ll always claim another test needs to be done, or the tests that were conducted were tainted, or that new evidence wasn’t considered. For them it’s not about agriculture or facts—it’s about values,” **Burnett** explained.

Precautionary Principle Rebutted

Burnett noted environmental activists assert “the precautionary principle” justifies extreme conservatism regarding introduction of new technologies.

“This is a recipe for stasis and death,” Burnett explained. “People can get hurt in any activity or using any technology. Should we not use fire because sometimes people, homes, and wildlands get burned? In the end, you shouldn’t be able to prospectively shut down someone’s liberty before you’ve proven that what they’re doing is harmful.

“In the case of Roundup resistant alfalfa, there is more than sufficient evidence that it is safe and can help produce bountiful crops. With this lawsuit, the environmentalists and a boutique industry are trying to shut down large-scale commercial farming.”

Henry I. Miller, a physician and fellow at Stanford University’s Hoover Institution and founding director of the FDA’s Office of Biotechnology, agreed, saying, “While consumers in North America alone have consumed more than 3 trillion servings of food that contains genetically engineered ingredients, not a single person has been injured or an ecosystem damaged.

“Although they boast significant benefits and an unblemished record of safety, genetically engineered crops are subject to excessive, hugely expensive regulation in every country of the world that grows them,” Miller observed.

Biotech Benefits

Farmers choose biotech because it protects crops from weeds and insects, notes Harry Cline, editor of the Western Farm Press.

“There has been no incidence of any person or farm animal being harmed by GM food. Zero. Not one,” said Cline.

Given the widespread use and proven environmental benefits of genetically improved corn, cotton, and soybeans, Cline says the alfalfa suit amounts to little more than harassment.

“Everything we grow in America is genetically modified. Parenting technology has been around since the Indians started growing corn. Now between 80 percent and 90 percent of the soybean, cotton, and corn grown in America is genetically modified.” Cline noted.