

Genetically Modified Alfalfa

Monsanto is seeking to register genetically modified alfalfa seed with the U.S. *Department of Agriculture, the Food and Drug Administration and the Environmental Protection Agency*. Alfalfa would be just the latest in a series of crops like corn and soybeans, that have been genetically altered. The alfalfa may be released for sale as soon as 2005 by Monsanto Co., a leader in the field of genetically altered crops. I believe that the release of genetically modified (GM) alfalfa would be a disaster. Here is why.

* Alfalfa is bee pollinated, and bees can travel long distances carrying pollen from one field to another. The isolation distance to prevent transfer of the genes from GM alfalfa to non-modified alfalfa would be many miles. Alfalfa seed is usually produced in concentrated districts, so crossing would be almost inevitable. Organic production systems have zero tolerance for genetically modified organisms, so organic alfalfa seed might soon become a thing of the past. Farmers will also use GM alfalfa for hay production. This hay is almost always cut after blooming starts, giving an opportunity for bees to transfer pollen from the GM crop to other seed crops of alfalfa. Alfalfa seed crops produce a lot of "hard" seed that can germinate even a few years after the field has been ploughed up. This would mean that a GM alfalfa seed crop would have the potential of contaminating non-GM alfalfa crops planted even a few years later. Alfalfa hay is a big part of organic livestock production. Organic livestock products may become a thing of the past if this release of genetic material goes ahead.

Choice will be taken away from the farmer and the consumer. The genetic characteristics Monsanto proposes to add to the new variety of alfalfa may or may not be harmful to the consumer or the ecosystem. But if they release their variety, there will be no going back. Genetic pollution has the potential to be much more serious than chemical pollution because there is no reasonable prospect of a cleanup. It will no longer be possible to obtain non GM alfalfa if Monsanto succeeds in contaminating seed stocks world wide. Our freedom of choice will be gone. Corporations protect their assets and value their profits. People have assets, too---their land, air, water and health.

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