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## GE rice discovery retriggers debate

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Chico Enterprise-Record

Samples of commercial rice in grain bins in Arkansas have turned up genetically modified rice.

Rice industry leaders and federal officials assured the public Friday there is no health risk, but the incident resurfaces a debate about whether genetically engineered crops can be contained.

Particularly of note is export trade to Japan, which put a stop to some rice imports due to the contamination.

Tim Johnson, president of the California Rice Commission, said the industry took notice of the news, but California rice is not on the list to be banned.

According to Friday's press conference, which included USDA Secretary Mike Johanns and Director for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition Robert Brackett, Bayer Crop Science detected trace amounts of the GE rice called "Liberty Link 601." Liberty Link is resistant to a specific herbicide, so when the herbicide is applied, the weeds are killed but the GE crop remains.

Liberty Link was never deregulated for commercial production, but officials have said the protein in the rice is identical to that found in two other GE crops deemed safe for production.

Bayer conducted field tests of Liberty Link from 1998 to 2001, but the company said it has no plans to market the rice, which is why there was never a request to deregulate it.

The rice under scrutiny is long-grain rice. The vast majority of the rice grown in California is medium- and short-grain rice.

Japan's ban specifically says only long-grain rice will be blocked, leaving California's rice industry out of range of losing significant export markets.

UC Davis farm adviser Chris Greer, of Colusa County, said the USDA will continue an investigation and testing.

He said the industry is highly regulated and strict protocols are in place. "Obviously there was some sort of a breakdown somewhere along the line."

Johnson said there is no commercially grown biotech rice in California, and none is currently being grown at the Rice Experiment Station in Biggs, which is a source of seed stock for the industry.

"The facts seem to point to that the California rice crop isn't going to be impacted," Johnson said.

To be cautious, the USDA has asked the Rice Experiment Station to provide samples of the more than a dozen rice varieties that are grown there for widespread distribution.

"We're trying to reassure (rice growers) that it's not an issue for California since we don't grow it and it was never here," said Kent McKenzie, director of the Rice Experiment Station.

Two years ago, a pharmaceutical company was poised to grow a rice genetically modified to contain a protein used in medicines. The rice industry has a committee to go over protocols to keep rice varieties separate.

The decision was made to segregate the pharmaceutical crop to areas in Southern California where rice is not a major crop and the company scrapped the California plan.

Difficult to trace

The amounts of GE rice were so small that it's difficult to find out where it came from. McKenzie said it could have been leftover material in a truck.

He said he's not very concerned about the latest news and the fact that it was detected at all shows that the system of protocols is working.

Greg Massa, a rice grower and co-chair of Rice Producers of California, agreed it looks like California rice farmers will not suffer if Japan follows through with a ban, but he's still concerned for the California rice market.

Japan's reaction after Friday's announcement shows how quickly trading partners will move, he said.

Rice Producers of California was recently resurrected to be an advocate of rice producers and to promote economic viability. Massa said the group opposes GE rice unless there is widespread market acceptance, the rice is kept segregated, rapid testing is available and there is legal liability established.

"If Japan shuts its doors, the industry will go south very quickly," he said. "In that case farmers need liability protection from those who grow GE crops."

He said he got a call from a colleague on the board of the U.S. Rice Producers Association and was told that as of Monday afternoon, Southern long-term rice futures had fallen \$150 million.

It's not just Japan's market that could be in jeopardy. South Korea and Taiwan have stated they don't want GE crops and the European Union is addressing the issue as well, Massa said.

A few counties, such as Butte, have tried to pass ballot initiatives to ban GE crops. Butte's failed but efforts to get bans passed in other counties continue.

Renata Brillinger of Californians for GE-Free Agriculture said she and others wary of GE crops are closely watching state Senate Bill 1056, which would take away counties' right to pass GE bans.

"We're hearing from legislators in Sacramento that they're sitting up and noticing this rice issue. It's generating some buzz and some concern," Brillinger said.

"This contamination incident underscores the need for more oversight," she added.

The state's farmers produce nearly 2 million tons of rice annually, making California the second largest rice-growing state in the nation behind Arkansas. Rice is produced on about 500,000 acres, primarily in the Sacramento Valley.

According to estimates for the 2006 crop year, rice production in the United States is valued at \$1.88 billion, approximately half of which is expected to be exported.