

'NO' TO GM FOOD CROPS

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[This decision which was made after a long process, reflects the growing sense of caution over GM technology.]

AFTER SEVERAL YEARS OF scientific and public debates it is reported that China will not commercialise genetically modified (GM) staple food crops such as rice and wheat for the next 5 to 10 years. The widely read *Economic Observer*, a financial weekly publication, citing a source close to the Ministry of Agriculture (MOA) confirmed this move in its 23 September 2011 issue.

This seems to be in line with the increased caution over GM technology that has reached the highest level of the government. At the Fourth International Biosafety Workshop in Beijing in April 2011 co-organised by several Chinese scientific organisations, a senior official of the Ministry of Environment in his opening speech said that Prime Minister Wen Jiabao has called for more caution on GMOs.

Uncertainty about the viability of the current GM technology is also raised as a key reason. The *Economic Observer* states that according to public reports, the GM rice Bt Shanyou 63 can increase yield by 8%. But the source person said that currently the GM seeds bred by domestic experts do not have "yield-increasing genes". Because the GM crop is pest resistant, the "increased yield" is in fact the savings from pesticides cost counted as yield. It should be noted that Shanyou 63 was first developed in 1981 by a team of scientists at the Fujian Provincial Institute of Agricultural Science.

The policy decision not to commercialise GM rice will be reflected in the "Modern agricultural crop seed industry development Plan (2011-2020)" to be released this year. The plan is based on the 18 April report of the State Council (the Cabinet equivalent in China) titled "Views on accelerating the development of modern crop seed industry". Interestingly, from the *Economic Observer* article it appears that GM is only briefly mentioned twice.

The exception that is under consideration for commercial planting is GM corn, and according to the *Economic Observer* article this is driven by the fact that corn imports are increasing rapidly and of the two varieties most widely grown, one variety developed domestically (not GM) may be facing new pests after several years of "peaking" in its production. GM corn and soya are currently imported for livestock feed and food processing but not approved for commercial cultivation.

When production safety certificates were given in November 2009 for two GM rice varieties and one GM corn variety it triggered heated discussion and debate within the scientific community and the public on the environmental and human safety of GM crops and

products. The biosafety assessment itself had taken more than five years with rice being the most sensitive as it is the country's main staple food. Each safety production certification is usually geographically circumscribed (China has 28 provinces and autonomous regions, and four metropolitan areas as well as two Special Administrative Regions) and not for the entire country. So, for example, the GM rice certificate was for one province only.

However such certification does not mean that commercial cultivation is allowed. This is reiterated in the *Global Times* article of 30 September that stated, "A spokesperson with the MOA's GM product safety department told the People's Daily in 2010 that just because GM products have received a safety certificate does not mean they can be commercialised, and strict regional and production tests are obligatory before products reach the public."

Meanwhile, Chen Xiaohua, a deputy MOA minister in a *Global Times* report of 30 September pledged to ensure safety of GM crops amid scientists' appeals for caution in commercialising such products.

The same report quoted Yuan Longping, a famous agricultural scientist in China known as the "father of hybrid rice," who has repeatedly urged the government to proceed cautiously with any move to commercialise GM crops. "One of the major features of GM crops is their ability to resist insects, but even scientists do not know whether such an ability in these crops will have any effect on human beings," Yuan told Nanfang Daily on 29 September.

Xue Dayuan of the Nanjing Research Institute of Environmental Sciences and chief biodiversity scientist of the Ministry of Environmental Protection, told the *Global Times* that authorities need to set up effective risk-evaluation and management mechanisms before commercialising GM products as some GM seeds are already circulating in the country, stressing that more needs to be done in terms of supervision and management of GM technology.

The State Council's April report cited in the *Economic Observer* article emphasises the need to further standardise GM agricultural crop safety evaluation.

The government's move to suspend commercialisation of major GM staple food crops has been reported widely and is welcomed by various groups in China. Greenpeace Food and Agriculture campaigner Pan Wenjing said that. "This step is a milestone in the process to end all GE (genetically engineered) rice commercialisation in China" adding that genetically engineered crops' long-term risks on human health and the environment are still unknown. Pan said that it has also been found that *many of the GM rice lines in China are embedded with non-Chinese patents, which poses a huge risk on China's food security should they become commercialised.*

In its press release on 25 September Greenpeace called on the government to reassess its GM policy and its massive GM investments, and instead invest more resources into modern ecological agriculture and other effective technologies. The goal should be to speed up the

transition of China's agriculture to a sustainable, ecological model, for the sake of protecting the environment, ensuring food safety, and securing the economic livelihood of farmers. □□□

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