

# GMOs taint other crops

**BIOLOGICAL POLLUTION: Bioengineered organisms' genes are showing up in conventional crops, creating problems for farmers promising purity**

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California rice farmers are worried Japanese customers will boycott their products if genetically engineered rice is allowed into the state.

And in Hawaii, organic papaya farmers are outraged because traces of genetically modified papaya are showing up in their harvest.

Biologists call it "gene flow." It's how plants have swapped genetic material through cross pollination since life first appeared.

But for people who choose to grow crops without genetically altering them, this natural biological exchange is a threat when genetically modified organisms (GMOs) are involved.

This week tensions between the biotech industry and its foes peaked when the US government published a study showing that genetically engineered grass found its way into conventionally grown grass some 19km away in Oregon's Willamette Valley.

The study led to renewed calls for tighter gene flow regulations, especially from farmers who promise customers that their products are free of genetically modified material.

More farmers are reporting finding trace amounts of genetically modified organisms cross-pollinated or otherwise mingled with their organically grown crops. Those are potentially devastating discoveries because organic consumers generally demand that the usually higher-priced food they buy be free of biotechnological adulteration.

The problem, like the weather, respects no boundaries.

A NAFTA watchdog group said in March it had found genetically engineered corn in Mexico despite that country's six-year-old biotechnology ban.

Meanwhile, consumers in Japan, Europe and elsewhere demand all their crops are grown conventionally. Farmers who can't make those biotech guarantees risk losing those markets.

US labeling rules allow for trace amounts of genetically engineered material in organic products. Still, organic growers and other growers fear market perception will turn against them if customers perceive that gene flow isn't being controlled.

That's why many rice farmers in California opposed a biotechnology company's plan this summer to increase the area it devotes to rice spliced with human genes to produce medicines. The state government refused to let the company expand.

It's also why organic growers in Hawaii earlier this month symbolically dumped 20 genetically engineered papayas into a trash bin labeled with a "biohazard" sign.

Papaya genetically engineered to resist a virus were commercially grown for the first time in 1998 and are widely credited with turning around a moribund industry devastated by disease.

But the bioengineered variety is not the only papaya grown in Hawaii. The island state is a major GMO testing ground for many kinds of crops due to its isolation, which is the only limit to this sort of unintended cross-pollinization.

"We are finding widespread contamination and farmers are concerned," said Noli Hoyer of the Hawaii anti-biotech group that organized the protest. "Once these genetically engineered crops are released commercially, they can't be contained."

An increasing number of scientific studies show evidence that genetically engineered crops are creeping into conventionally grown fields.

The Union of Concerned Scientists in February found trace amounts of genetically engineered seeds of corn, soy and canola mixed in with seeds that were supposed to be conventionally bred.