

Diseased animals - but genetically engineered plants are safe?

New debate on the health risks of genetically engineered plants

26 January 2016 / Several new publications on the outcomes of feeding genetically engineered plants to cattle and goats have triggered a new controversial debate about the impact on the health of animals.

One new publication documents the case of a German farm where dairy cows died after being fed with genetically engineered plants (1). Although this happened about 15 years ago, the real causes are still cause for controversy. Industry continues to reject all the allegations that were made, and sees no need for further investigation.

Publications documenting the health impact on the offspring of goats fed with genetically engineered soybeans are currently gaining international attention, after some doubts were raised about the quality of the publications. Apparently some of the figures used in the publications were used several times (2).

Testbiotech believes that these publications should trigger further investigation. In the case of the abovementioned German farmer, a genetically engineered maize, which has in the meantime been withdrawn by Syngenta (Bt176), was fed to cows for several years. The cows were also fed with other genetically engineered plants such as herbicide resistant soybeans. So far, there have been no targeted follow-up investigations into similar circumstances.

There was also no detailed follow-up or investigation into the health impacts on the goats. There are several possible causes for the findings reported by the Italian scientists, thus no final conclusion can be drawn from these studies. In most of their publications, the scientist did not even find any health impacts from feeding genetically engineered plants to animals such as rabbits and cattle. Interestingly, the attack on the Italian scientists is of much more interest to the media than their original findings. The reason for this is probably because several non-governmental organisations made references to the publications.

Within the last few years, the biotech-industry has repeatedly tried to dispel concerns about the health risks of genetically engineered plants. They frequently refer to a publication written by a former staff member of Monsanto, which gives an overview of the data of livestock in the US (3). However, a more detailed analysis shows that the outcome is not reliable (4).

Testbiotech is concerned that health safety of genetically engineered plants is being declared again and again, even though there is insufficient scientific data to back this claim up. In the case of EU authorisation, for many applications no feeding trials are performed. Just recently, the EU Food Safety Authority EFSA concluded safety for a new genetically engineered maize, which was developed to be resistant to a combination of herbicides and produces several insecticidal toxins. Even so, no actual feeding studies were carried out to investigate the health risks of the whole food and feed (5).

(1) <http://www.criigen.org/communique/99/display/The-first-GMO-Bt-crop-to-be...> [1]

(2) <http://www.nature.com/news/italian-papers-on-genetically-modified-crops-...> [2]

(3) Van Eenennaam A.L. & Young A.E. (2014) Prevalence and impacts of genetically engineered feedstuffs on livestock populations, J. Anim. Sci. 92: 4255-4278.

(4) Testbiotech Background (2015) The impact of industry on publicly-funded risk research projects on genetically engineered plants, www.testbiotech.org/en/node/1436 [3]

(5) Testbiotech Background (2016) Testbiotech comment on the Scientific Opinion (EFSA-GMO-DE-2009-66) for placing on the market of herbicide tolerant and insect resistant maize Bt11 × MIR162 × MIR604 × GA21 from Syngenta, <http://www.testbiotech.org/node/1551> [4]

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Links

[1] <http://www.criigen.org/communique/99/display/The-first-GMO-Bt-crop-to-be-commercialized-was-toxic-to-animals-over-the-long-term> [2] <http://www.nature.com/news/italian-papers-on-genetically-modified-crops-under-investigation-1.19183> [3] <http://www.testbiotech.org/en/node/1436> [4] <http://www.testbiotech.org/node/1551>