

The Return of the Triffids

In September 2009 genetically engineered plants returned to life like supposedly extinct monsters from a movie: Herbicide tolerant Flax CDC-FLØØ1-2 (FP967), more commonly named Triffid, was found in the European markets. All of its seeds were thought to have been destroyed in 2001. Nevertheless the genetically engineered crop popped up in food products in Germany and other countries in the EU, from where shipments were sent in regions also outside the EU. On October 5 2009 the news agency Reuters all in all listed 28 countries: Germany, France, Sweden, the United Kingdom, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Italy, Austria, Portugal, Romania, Croatia, Iceland, South Korea, Norway, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Mauritius and Switzerland.

Canadian flax farmers are under pressure to loosen up their markets – two thirds of the 900 000 tons of flax seed harvested in Canada each year are normally exported to Europe – but this market now is closed because contamination seems to be widespread throughout the conventional harvest.

The flax CDC Triffid seeds were created in 1988, approved for market in Canada in 1996 and no further risk assessment has been undertaken since then. The mixture of several genes as combined in this case, with sequences isolated from plants and from bacteria, might raise some specific safety concerns. Potential risks and technical uncertainties can hardly be excluded in this case. Risk assessment of these plants was carried out about 20 years ago at a time when more detailed methods of investigation to detect unexpected changes in the genome, the epigenome and metabolome were not available. Further no feeding studies were carried out. This fact makes it difficult to judge safety. Any published responses saying that these crops in general should be considered safe are hardly based on science, but on assumptions.

For general debate on risk assessment of genetically engineered plants see the Testbiotech report "[risk reloaded](#)" [1]

The name 'Triffid' was introduced by John Wyndham, a well known science fiction author, whose book "The Day of the Triffids" was published in 1951. For [book review](#) [2] see here.

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