Why we do know (nearly) nothing about health risks of genetically engineered plants - French rat study highlights significant deficits in current EU procedures

Munich, 23 September 2012. French researchers have reported severe adverse effects on the health of rats fed with the genetically engineered maize NK603 or exposed to a low concentration of a pesticide formulation. Consequently, the Commission has announced that European Food Safety Authority EFSA will evaluate the French study by the end of the year. However, already on 27 of September the EU Member States will vote on market authorisation for a new genetically engineered maize (MIR162) foreseen for usage in food and feed.

Testbiotech is of the opinion that the results of the study as published should be taken seriously and is urging for a change in practice of EU risk assessment. The discussion about the French study reveals several deficits in the current procedures:

The EU approach to risk assessment is in itself wrong: Risk assessment as performed by the European Food Safety Authority, EFSA, works with so-called comparative risk assessment, which assumes the safety of genetically engineered food as long as there is no proof to the contrary. Therefore, for example, EFSA does not request any feeding studies using genetically engineered plants to investigate health effects if health risks are not already evident. If the burden of proof were to be reversed and companies required to demonstrate safety, a much more comprehensive risk assessment would be necessary.
EU regulations request the monitoring of effects on health once the genetically engineered plants have been authorised. However, neither the EU nor the US monitors potential effects on health from the consumption of the food products. Consequently, although we know that consumers are not likely to suffer from acute diseases after consumption, we have no knowledge of whether these products cause chronic diseases such as cancer. This has even been confirmed in statements made by the EU Commission. A legal dossier commissioned by Testbiotech shows that current practice clearly violates EU regulations. The same dossier also shows that residues from spraying with pesticides such as glyphosate must be taken into account during the risk assessment of the genetically engineered plants - this is not currently included in EFSA practice. EFSA claims it would be enough just to apply normal pesticide regulation.
There are severe conflicts of interests at the EFSA and other national state authorities. Many of the so-called independent experts have vested interests. Whilst scientists are never completely free from interests, those experts claiming safety of genetically engineered plants whilst linked to Biotech industry or involved in the development of genetically engineered plants are a serious problem for civil society. The scientific expertise currently available is not sufficiently reliable. It is also worrying that several experts now doubt the quality of the French study while at the same time there is hardly any reaction to inadequate studies presented by industry.
Testbiotech is demanding the re-organisation of the risk assessment of genetically engineered plants in the EU. Further political initiatives are needed to strengthen risk assessment to make it more independent of industry. The risks of the products already placed on the market must be re-evaluated to far higher standards than those currently applied. New market authorisations such as the one for MIR162 should be put on hold. EU regulation requests application of the precautionary principle to protect consumers and that the marketing of products must be stopped if new findings raise doubts about the safety of genetically engineered plants.

Further information: Factsheet of Testbiotech about deficits in EU risk assessment [1]
French study [2]
Further link to study [3]
legal dossier about post market monitoring of health risks [4]
Testbiotech backgrounder on NK603 [5]
Testbiotech backgrounder on MIR162 [6]

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