

New scientific publication: EU risk assessment of genetically engineered glyphosate-resistant crops is insufficient

Data presented for the approval process are not representative of the imported products

17 December 2019 / Already 65 types ('events') of genetically engineered plants are currently allowed for import and usage in food and feed in the EU that are resistant to herbicides, especially glyphosate. In recent years, the EU Parliament has repeatedly voted for higher standards of risk assessment. Similar demands were made by experts from several EU member states and Testbiotech. Nevertheless, the EU Commission approved nearly all the applications for import. Results of the international research project RAGES (Risk Assessment of Genetically Engineered plants in the EU and Switzerland) have now been published and show that concerns are justified.

The published results show that the amount of herbicide sprayed on the plants during the field trials specifically carried out for the approval process, was much lower compared to what might be expected under current agricultural practice. The background: the weeds have adapted to the use of glyphosate and therefore, most genetically engineered soybeans have to be sprayed two or three times during one growing season. On average, the amount applied per hectare is 3 to 4 kilograms, although in many cases much higher dosages are applied. However, in the field trials carried out by Bayer/Monsanto, most of the plants were sprayed just once and only with around 25 percent of the amount of glyphosate applied under real conditions.

Consequently, the plants assessed by European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) are not representative in real terms of the imported products. Therefore, the results from the risk assessment are not sufficiently reliable. This is a major problem: These gaps in risk assessment not only concern the load of residues from spraying, but also overall plant composition and combinatorial effects that may impact health at the stage of consumption.

These findings are also a matter of concern because EFSA pesticide experts repeatedly stated that there is insufficient data to decide upon the safety of the residues from spraying present in the genetically engineered plants. This is a major problem: As another scientific publication written in the context of RAGES shows, huge amounts of glyphosate can enter the global food chain via the harvest of herbicide-resistant soybeans.

Testbiotech demands the new EU Commission reassesses the import approvals already granted, and that it stops pending import applications. Just before the end of its term of office, the previous EU Commission approved four other genetically engineered herbicide-resistant plants for import.

The RAGES project was carried out between 2016 and 2019. Its purpose was to critically evaluate risk assessment of genetically engineered (GE) food plants at the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) and its Swiss counterpart. The European Network of Scientists for Social and Environmental Responsibility (ENSSER), its Swiss branch CSS (Critical Scientists Switzerland), GeneWatch UK and Testbiotech participated in the project. The project was funded by the Mercator Foundation, Switzerland, and was completely independent of the interests of the biotechnology industry. The results will be presented on 23 January in Brussels (in case of interest, please register at post@testbiotech.org).

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Further information

Scientific publication on gaps in risk assessment of genetically herbicide tolerant plants (with involvement of Testbiotech):

<https://enveurope.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s12302-019-0274-1>

Scientific publication on the amount of glyphosate that can enter the global food chain via genetically engineered plants:

www.mdpi.com/2304-8158/8/12/669

Overview of the RAGES findings:

www.testbiotech.org/en/content/rages-factsheet-summary

Most recent EFSA assessment regarding residues stemming from spraying with glyphosate:

www.efsa.europa.eu/en/efsajournal/pub/5862