

Genetically engineered bacteria in animal feed products are spreading resistance to antibiotics

EU Commission needed four years to take action

30 November 2018 / Currently, the EU is facing the biggest case of uncontrolled spread of non-approved genetically engineered organisms in its history: viable bacteria with a four-fold resistance to antibiotics, of which three are due to genetic engineering, have been found in animal feed products. The resistance is to antibiotics that are therapeutically important. According to the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA), the animal feed products pose a risk for “consumers, users and the environment”.

In September 2018, the EU Commission ruled that the affected animal feed products had to be removed from the EU market by 10 November – but also allowed a transitional period until mid-2019 for this to happen. The EU Commission and EU member states should have taken action much earlier: the first reports of such GM microorganisms appeared as early as 2014.

“This case shows that the EU Commission is not taking the risks associated with genetically engineered organisms seriously enough. These bacteria were able to spread for several years in animal farming environments, and also pass their resistance on to other disease-causing microbes,” says Christoph Then for Testbiotech. “This is in effect a massive non-approved release of genetically engineered organisms. It should have been stopped as soon as possible, without delay.”

The feed additive distributed via a huge feed company in the EU and is probably produced in China. The genetically engineered bacteria are meant to produce Vitamin B2 (riboflavin). There are many natural sources of riboflavin, but livestock producers are increasingly using the genetically engineered feed additives. EFSA has already assessed and approved many similar products. However, such additives are only allowed to be mixed into animal feed products if there is no longer any trace of the bacteria.

The specific feed additives were declared safe by EFSA in 2014, and, according to data from industry, they were no supposed to contain any viable genetically engineered bacteria. However, the first findings of the microbes were reported in Belgium in the same year. In October 2016, a joint investigation involving several EU regulatory authorities and the German consumer protection authority (BVL), found that the specific animal feed products should never have been marketed. Nevertheless, no action was taken to remove the products from the market. Instead, in 2016, the EU Commission asked EFSA for a new risk assessment of the feed additive. It took EFSA until March 2018 to publish its report, which concluded that the genetically engineered bacteria posed substantial risks for health and the environment. Subsequently, it took until September 2018 for the EU Commission to take action and decide to remove the products from the market. Notwithstanding, mixtures of the feed containing the additives can still be used until the middle of next year.

It is the second case of a mass release of unapproved genetically engineered organisms in the EU. In 2017, genetically engineered petunia plants made headlines when they were found in several garden centres in the EU. Testbiotech believes that in order to prevent uncontrolled spread into the environment we need to be especially vigilant in regard to organisms manipulated with new methods of genetic engineering, such as CRISPR-Cas.

“To enable independent controls, it is absolutely necessary to make precise data available to show exactly how each organism has been changed. It is especially concerning that the EU Commission is attempting to keep this information secret in future. The EU Commission has, in fact, introduced a new regulation into existing food law for this purpose, Regulation 178/2002. The European Parliament is due to take a vote on this regulation in December 2018,” Christoph Then states.

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Further information:

The EU Commission decision: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1543312838912&uri=CELEX:32018R1254>

The EFSA assessment: www.efsa.europa.eu/en/efsajournal/pub/5223

Joint publication of EU and German authorities:

www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0308814617304193