

Coexistence Or 'No' Existence For New High-Yielding Crops?

How USDA's Latest Debate Can Influence Your Future Planting Decisions



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WASHINGTON, D.C.

A recent meeting called by Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack to explore the topic of coexistence for Roundup Ready® Alfalfa (RRA) is raising new concerns about who will have the freedom to plant certain crops in prime growing regions of the U.S.

and whether or not USDA staff is politicizing regulations that are required to be "science-based."

Vilsack describes coexistence as a way for genetically-modified, conventional and organic producers to all get along in the marketplace.

"We are equally committed to finding solutions that support not only the developers and users of biotechnology products, but growers who rely on purity in the non-genetically engineered seed supply," Vilsack emphasized during a recent press conference on this topic.

Some participants questioned whether the Dec. 20 meeting, which included representatives from the biotech, conventional seed and the organic communities, as well as some farm organization representatives, will politicize a process that is required to be science-based. But organic producers argued that they need to play a larger role in the regulatory process because they are being financially disadvantaged when biotech traits accidentally show up in their fields.

Another participant, who asked not to be identified, described the hastily arranged meeting process as "disturbing" and "an invitation for more lawsuits."

National Farmers Union President Roger Johnson says Secretary Vilsack recognizes that "this won't be the end of the lawsuits, but it could narrow the field of disputes."

"USDA would probably not even be having this discussion if it weren't for unreasonable tolerance levels in the international marketplace," he says.

"This is a market that doesn't understand there is no such thing as zero," says Johnson. "You can get a certain amount of anything that doesn't belong when you harvest. Most markets take that into consideration."

"The most important thing USDA can do is to convince international customers that they need reasonable tolerance levels."

Fred Kirschenmann, Distinguished Fellow with the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture, says Secretary Vilsack made a strong case that "coexistence" should be resolved by stakeholders rather than the courts. But even on the subject of biotech alfalfa, there is strong disagreement over how to proceed.

Standards already in place

Recognizing the challenges confronted in keeping seed genetics separate, the National Alfalfa & Forage Alliance sat down with biotech, conventional and organic stakeholders in 2007 and developed detailed industry standards that are working, says Mark McCaslin, President of Forage Genetics International. "We get coexistence. It's part of our culture."

In 2004, Forage Genetics International (FGI) and Monsanto petitioned USDA's Animal and Plant Inspection Service (APHIS) for non-regulated status for two alfalfa lines, which are tolerant to the herbicide glyphosate. That petition was granted in June of 2005 and 200,000 acres of Roundup Ready® Alfalfa (RRA) were planted. But the Center for Food Safety and other groups challenged that decision and federal courts ruled in 2007 that no new plantings would be allowed until USDA completed a thorough environmental impact statement (EIS). At that time, the EIS was expected to take two years.

Four years later, USDA's Animal and Plant Inspection Service (APHIS) finally completed the EIS. Two weeks ago, the agency issued a draft document outlining potential options for planting alfalfa and for the first time, suggested new restrictions on how and where the crop can be grown.

USDA considered three alternatives during the preparation of the final EIS:

- 1) to maintain the RR alfalfa's status as a regulated article;
- 2) to deregulate RR alfalfa; or
- 3) to deregulate RR alfalfa with geographic restrictions and isolation distances for the production of RR alfalfa.

The last two options were described as "preferred" but it was option #3 that generated the most attention for a crop that had previously

been approved. In some states, plantings would be restricted and in other areas, organic and biotech fields would need to be five miles apart. For more on the draft document:

www.agri-pulse.com/USDA_alfalfa_EIS_coexistence_201012116S1.asp

There is a minimum 30-day period required between publication of the EIS and a deregulation decision by the agency. No commercial activity is allowed until and unless the USDA issues a decision deregulating RRA.

Far-reaching impacts

Industry observers quickly pointed out that USDA's proposed document has ramifications for international trade, domestic production, private property rights and even land values. With RRA users self reporting a \$110 per-acre advantage over conventional alfalfa, a government decision to restrict plantings in certain geographic areas would create "winners and losers," they say. RRA also requires less use of crop protection products, providing both financial and environmental benefits.

McCaslin says one of the two alfalfa deregulation options preferred by USDA, with geographic and isolation distance restrictions "goes well beyond what's necessary" and could prohibit planting Roundup Ready alfalfa on 20 percent of the acres.

He's "hopeful and optimistic" that USDA will once again approve plantings. About 350,000 farmer members of Land O'Lakes cooperative made the decision to pursue Roundup Ready alfalfa, and they should be able to benefit from their investment in high-yielding varieties, he adds.

Kirschenmann says organic producers need the certainty that their crops can be grown without harm or "contamination" from biotech varieties. He shared a personal example from growing organic canola on his North Dakota farm.

"At first, we worked it out with our neighbors who wanted to plant Roundup Ready canola and we all followed recommendations to have a two-mile buffer between the two operations. But then the number of farmers planting Roundup Ready canola increased so much that it was virtually impossible to keep our crop from being contaminated."

Kirschenmann is not confident that USDA's current options proposed for deregulation Roundup Ready alfalfa will work.

"I want to be open to the possibility, but they haven't come up with a plan that's convincing," he says. Absent any solution from USDA, Kirschenmann says the only alternative is to seek judicial action.

Russell Williams, representing the American Farm Bureau Federation, questioned the need for stricter USDA regulations when farmers are currently finding ways to make "coexistence" work.

"We have farmers that do all three (biotech, conventional, organic) types of agriculture on their same operations. They've never lost their NOP (organic) certification, and they continue to make profits."

One participant questioned how USDA can negotiate "coexistence" when the end game for many organic advocates is actually "no existence" for biotechnology.

Just two days after the meeting, Ronnie Cummins, Director of the Organic Consumers Association, penned an opinion piece for the Huffington Post titled: "USDA Recommends 'Coexistence' with Monsanto: We Say Hell No!"

"Early in 2011 the Organic Consumers Association, joined by our consumer, farmer, environmental, and labor allies, plans to launch a nationwide campaign to stop Monsanto and the Biotech Bullies from force-feeding unlabeled GMOs to animals and humans," wrote Cummins. "Utilizing scientific data, legal precedent, and consumer power the OCA and our local coalitions will educate and mobilize at the grassroots level to pressure retailers to implement "truth-in-labeling" practices; while simultaneously organizing a critical mass to pass mandatory local and state truth-in-labeling ordinances or ballot initiatives similar to labeling laws already in effect for country of origin, irradiated food, allergens, and carcinogens. If local government bodies refuse to take action, wherever possible we will gather petition signatures and place these truth-in-labeling initiatives directly on the ballot in 2011 or 2012. Δ

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