

2. AGRICULTURE: USDA clears corn engineered for ethanol (02/11/2011)

Paul Voosen, E&E reporter

The Department of Agriculture today approved for unlimited cultivation the first corn variety bioengineered to improve ethanol production, a long-pending decision that has broad implications for the domestic fuel market and faces stiff opposition from traditional supporters of biotech crops.

The corn, developed by the biotech firm Syngenta, expresses a common enzyme, alpha amylase, that is responsible for dividing corn's complicated starch into simpler sugars before fermentation. The amylase, variants of which exist in the human saliva, is typically added to corn during processing. Syngenta hopes heightened expression of the enzyme will cause an uptick in efficiency, it said.

The crop "provides U.S. ethanol producers with a proven means to generate more gallons of ethanol from their existing facilities," Davor Pisk, Syngenta's chief operating officer, said in a release. The corn, he continued, "reduces the energy and water consumed in the production process while substantially reducing carbon emissions."

While Syngenta's corn may prove economically useful for farmers and distillers, it is unlikely to make a large dent in the land devoted to ethanol production. If all the country's dry millers of corn for ethanol migrated to amylase corn, only 521,000 acres would be saved, USDA estimates, out of a total of some 32.6 million corn acres that currently go toward ethanol production. Currently, 40 percent of all U.S. corn production goes toward ethanol.

USDA's decision comes at a sensitive time in the corn industry. The price for a bushel of corn has doubled since last June, to \$7, driven up by poor harvests in Central Asia and South America, along with expanded biofuel production, among other factors. In recent months, rising food prices across the world have reignited the debate about using traditional food crops for fuel ([Greenwire](#), Feb. 11).

Syngenta petitioned for the crop's deregulation in 2005. Since then, several powerful corn milling groups and food processors, including the North American Millers' Association (NAMA), a longtime proponent of agriculture biotechnology, have expressed concern that the spread of the crop could damage traditional food production. If the corn's amylase is released into snack foods, breakfast cereals or "battered products," the association warned in a statement, the products' starch would presumably begin to break down, causing damage.

"USDA has failed to provide the public with sufficient scientific data on the economic impacts of contamination on food production, or information on how USDA will ensure Syngenta's compliance with a stewardship plan," said Mary Waters, NAMA's president.

Late last month, NAMA sent a [letter](#) to USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack, warning that during a presentation last year, Syngenta displayed data indicating that even a low presence of its amylase corn -- one kernel in a thousand -- could damage food production. Since then, in January, NAMA and its members have received additional test results through USDA, it said, but it has not had time to review that data.

USDA acknowledged industry concerns in approving the crop. The agency announced it was "pleased" that the millers continue to talk with Syngenta about the corn's effect on their business. Syngenta has formed an advisory council on the closed-loop system it will put in place for the corn, the agency noted, a council USDA will join.

Environmental groups also expressed outrage at the crop's approval, lamenting the broad and controversial economic support the government lends to corn-based ethanol through subsidies and fuel standards.

"This type of genetically engineered corn would have no reason to exist if it were not for the massive mandate for biofuels consumption passed by Congress in 2007," said Kate McMahon, biofuels campaign coordinator at Friends of the Earth, in a release.

Syngenta has vowed that its corn will be grown away from varieties destined for food use. Initially, the company plans to cultivate the crop in a limited range -- reportedly western Kansas and Nebraska -- near existing ethanol plants, with an eye toward broader expansion in the coming years.

The amylase corn is already approved for export to a variety of countries, including Mexico, Canada and Australia. The Food and Drug Administration cleared the corn as safe for food and feed use in 2007 -- not an unexpected decision, given that many grains, including corn, naturally produce amylase during germination, a vital step in traditional beer brewing.

[Click here](#) to see USDA's announcement.

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