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A Belated Debate on Modified Beets

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While genetically modified crops have been the focus of [pitched battles](#) in Europe for nearly a decade, they have slipped into America's fields and onto its tables with hardly a peep. Although the technology was only developed in the 1980s, more than three-quarters of the nation's corn, soy and sugar beets are now genetically altered. The figure is close to zero in many European countries.

Genetically engineered crops are modified in the lab to confer some trait that gives them a commercial advantage, like the ability to resist insects or to ripen slowly to extend supermarket shelf life.

Chad Case for The New York Times A genetically modified sugar beet crop in Rupert, Idaho.

But, as my colleague Andrew Pollack has [written](#), an ongoing court case in California has set off a belated debate about whether the United States should cast its lot with genetically altered farming — at least in the case of the sugar beet.

In the latest salvo, environmentalists and farmers sued the federal Agriculture Department in a San Francisco court on Thursday, seeking to overturn permits it recently issued that would allow the planting of a genetically modified sugar beet seed crop. A seed crop is planted to generate large volumes of new seed rather than the beets themselves.

And on Aug. 13, a San Francisco judge issued an injunction against further planting of genetically modified sugar beets, saying that that the Agriculture Department's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service had not carried out an adequate study of the environmental impact before approving the planting of such crops in prior years.

Beets are planted in the spring, and it is not clear what interim measures the department could put in place by then. The inspection service is expediting the completion of a [new environmental impact statement](#), although that could take more than a year.

While some groups in Europe are opposed to the planting of any genetically modified crops, the effect of modifying each type of seed -- including potential hazards -- varies according to what new genes they possess. The sugar beet in question has a gene that allows it to survive exposure to the popular herbicide Roundup Ready. Farmers planting

this beet can apply large amounts of herbicide to fields without worrying about killing the crop. The seed crop of Roundup Ready Beet, a Monsanto product, is grown in Oregon.

Noting that sugar beets cross-pollinate with table beets and Swiss chard, environmental groups contend that the gene could contaminate the crops of organic farmers nearby. That would “deprive farmers and consumers of the choice to grow and consume nongenetically engineered food,” said Earthjustice and the Center for Food Safety, two of the groups that challenged the Agriculture Department in court this week.

In issuing the growing permits for the seed crop, the inspection service said they were “nonflowering,” meaning that there should be little chance of accidental contamination of nearby crops. But the environmental groups asked how the owners expected to harvest seed from plants that had not flowered.

You can read a good overview of the history of genetically modified crops in the United States [here](#).

A previous version of this post referred to a herbicide as Roundup Ready; the herbicide is actually called Roundup, and plants that have been modified so they are not harmed by it are known as Roundup Ready.