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Still no ruling on GM sugar beets

By Caroline Scott-Thomas, 09-Mar-2010

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A federal court judge has yet to reach a decision about whether the cultivation of genetically modified (GM) sugar beets should be blocked until an Environmental Impact Statement has been completed.

In September, Judge Jeffrey White, of the Federal District Court in San Francisco, said that Monsanto's Roundup Ready sugar beets had not been properly assessed and require an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), overturning a previous decision made by the Bush Administration to deregulate the crop. He said that the USDA should have assessed the impact the sugar beets could have on closely related crops such as red table beets and Swiss chard.

Now the plaintiffs, a coalition represented by Earthjustice and the Center for Food Safety, are looking to Judge White to block the further cultivation of Monsanto's Roundup Ready sugar beets while an EIS is prepared. Currently, Monsanto is the only supplier of GM sugar beets.

A hearing has been scheduled for June, but it is expected that a decision will be made sooner than that, because the planting season is due to start in the coming weeks.

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The defendants issued the following statement via the Sugar Industry Biotech Council's website: "On March 5, 2010, U.S. District Court Judge Jeffrey White conducted a hearing on the plaintiffs' request for a preliminary injunction. The judge took the matter under advisement and will issue his decision at a future time."

The first crop of Monsanto's Roundup Ready sugarbeets, genetically engineered to be resistant to the company's Roundup-brand herbicide, was harvested in the fall of 2008 following approval from the USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service.

But the Center for Food Safety has expressed concern that GM beet pollen could contaminate non-GM and organic crops because sugar beets are wind pollinated.

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