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The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) appears committed to allowing biotechnology companies to grow food crops such as rice, corn, and soybeans genetically engineered to produce drugs and industrial chemicals, despite the real and serious risk of contamination of our food supply. The USDA currently allows such crops to be grown outdoors in food-producing regions, and has signaled that new rules expected soon will incorporate vague measures the department hopes will avert a food safety disaster. These measures might include superficial food safety assessments that the department would use to allow so-called “safe” levels of drugs in our food supply.

UCS believes that contamination of the food supply is inevitable if the USDA continues to allow this risky practice. Discovery of a contaminant even at a “safe” level will surely cause economic disruption for food companies and farmers, as consumers will not accept any amount of drugs in their food. An outright ban on pharma food crops is the only sure way to avoid such an outcome.

Our briefing paper, “Food Safety Assessments Won’t Quell Consumer Fears About ‘Safe’ Levels of Drugs in Food,” evaluates the approach put forward by the USDA—that a ban is not necessary if food risk is assessed and confinement measures are adopted commensurate with risk. The paper concludes that such a regulatory scheme would neither reassure consumers nor protect food manufacturers and moreover would be a waste of government resources.

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National Headquarters

2 Brattle Square, Cambridge, MA 02238-9105

