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USDA announces meetings on GE regulation revision

By Caroline Scott-Thomas, 11-Mar-2009

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The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has invited interested parties to take part in a scoping session on the agenda for meetings discussing a proposed rule for genetically engineered (GE) organisms in April.

The proposed rule will revise existing regulations for the importation, interstate movement and environmental release of certain GE organisms – regulations which have not been subject to a comprehensive review since they were first introduced in 1987.

The initial public comment period attracted over 15,000 comments after the proposal was first published in October, prompting the USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) to extend its public comment period for a further 60 days, to March 17.

However, APHIS has now announced that it will be extending this period for another 60 days following the April meetings.

The advance of GE

Since the regulations were first introduced nearly 22 years ago, public awareness of GE organisms has increased significantly, as has the global area dedicated to GE crops. According to the latest figures from the Worldwatch Institute, the total global area of genetically engineered crops increased 12 percent in 2007 compared to the previous year, bringing total land area up to 114.3million hectares. The US accounts for half of this.

However, controversy over the benefits of genetic modification continues, including questions about the technology's ability to deliver on promises of enhanced yields and nutrition.

Despite this, APHIS has said that it is committed to *"the continuing support of coexistence among various agricultural production systems in U.S. agriculture."*

Specific APHIS interests

APHIS has said that it is particularly interested in receiving comments on which GE organisms should be included in or excluded from the proposed regulations and on eliminating the notification procedure to minimize delay for those wishing to introduce or transport GE organisms.

Acting administrator of APHIS Kevin Shea said: *"Revising our biotechnology regulations is a significant undertaking and we are seeking active participation from the public. In order to have focused, substantive dialogue at our April meetings, we want to identify topics for discussion as well as possible meeting formats. We strongly encourage interested parties to share their suggestions so we can better serve their needs."*

It has also invited suggestions for protecting against the introduction of plant pests or noxious weeds, and for regulating and minimizing risk from GE crops that produce pharmaceutical and industrial compounds.

Transcripts of the March scoping session will be made part of the rulemaking record, APHIS said.



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